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TORQUIL'S SUCCESS

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NOVELS BY THE SAME AUTHOR

HALF IN EARNEST
EARTH
APRIL PANHASARD
THE MAN WITH THE DOUBLE HEART
THE INDIVIDUAL
AUTUMN
THE BEST IN LIFE
THE HIDDEN VALLEY
THE BREATHLESS MOMENT

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TORQUIL'S SUCCESS

BY

MURIEL HINE

NEW YORK: JOHN LANE COMPANY
LONDON: JOHN LANE THE BODLEY HEAD LTD.
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TO

MY GODSON

ERIC BROOKS

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Because God put His adamantine fate
  Between my sullen heart and its desire,
I swore that I would burst the Iron Gate,
  Rise up, and curse Him on His throne of fire.
Earth shuddered at my crown of blasphemy,
  But Love was as a flame about my feet;
  Proud up the Golden Stair I strode; and beat
Thrice on the Gate, and entered with a cry——

  All the great courts were quiet in the sun,
    And full of vacant echoes; moss had grown
  Over the glassy pavement, and begun
    To creep within the dusty council-halls.
  An idle wind blew round an empty throne
    And stirred the heavy curtains on the walls.

Rupert Brooke

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PART I
THE IRON GATE

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TORQUIL'S SUCCESS

CHAPTER I

TORQUIL wrote.

In the still room the only sound was the steady scratch of his pen, that tried in vain to keep pace with the phrases forming in his brain. At moments the words would run together, to be cut by a bisecting line, vicious as a dagger-thrust; at others the point of his pen would find a flaw in the woody surface, splutter and leave a star of ink. Torquil had no time to blot it. The page covered, he would frown, tear it off impatiently and drop it on the shabby carpet, strewn with its predecessors. His fountain pen had run dry and he dipped it now in the ink-pot. His flexible brows were drawn together in the effort of concentration; his body burned, his mouth was parched. Aware of physical discomfort, he could not connect cause and effect; he was lost in a world far removed from the intolerable stuffy room with its stained walls and blackened ceiling.

Hours before, in a sudden rage, he had sprung up and closed the window in the face of a mournful gentleman with a cornet pressed to his lips. Barrel organs were torture enough, but this lost soul with his single dirge, who took up his stand, dusk after dusk, with a meek air of ownership in Torquil's own strip of gutter, roused the young author's murderous instincts.

Since then, the staling air in the room had acquired new properties. From below a smell of burnt gas rose and was blent with that of cooking. Suddenly the burners flared

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in the twin bracket over the table. The kitchen stove had been extinguished and the jets responded to added pressure. They whistled shrilly and fretted his nerves, but Torquil's mouth merely tightened, his pen drove on as before. The end of the chapter was in sight. He was upheld on invisible wings by the joy and fulfilment of creation. A moment before——

But there came a tap, and the door opened. A gaunt woman stood on the threshold, breathing across an untidy tray.

"Yer supper," she panted.

Torquil swore. The woman, undeterred, advanced. An errant sheet of manuscript crackled under her heavy foot. The draught, filtering up from the basement, stirred others on the loose pile. Torquil, exasperated, rose, seized the tray and bumped it down on an empty chair against the wall.

"Thanks."

She refused to take the hint. Her eyes, red-rimmed, small and furtive, met his absent stare with an open contempt, then fell and wandered to the table, settling on the tilted ink pot. Her blunt finger came down on the dingy cloth where the rims of plates had left greasy, indented circles and was raised again suspiciously.

"Ink!" She exhibited the smear. "You'll 'ave to pay for that, young man. It was new on when you came. And wasting the gas!" She reached up an arm to lower the jet and revealed a gap where a strained sleeve had parted from the untidy bodice, which lacked buttons and was pinned across her shrunken bosom.

Torquil felt suffocating.

"That will do," he said shortly, taking up his pen again.

"*Will* it?" She jeered at him, and produced a crumpled piece of paper. "I'd be obliged if you'd pay this—yer washing bill, as you've forgot!"

He took it from her mechanically.

"I'll pay it to-morrow."

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"You'll pay it to-night." Her red-rimmed eyes were full of malice. "It's for *last* week."

Torquil's control snapped.

"Oh, clear out!" he shouted at her.

She backed instinctively to the door.

"That's right—bully a widder! If my old man was alive, 'e'd tell you off. Yes, 'e would! But I've 'ad about enough of this—mucking up the front room, and 'ot meals cooked at night. It don't *pay* me to keep yer!"

Torquil choked down a retort. He was longing to give the woman notice, but the place was cheap and he owed her rent. He stooped, picked up the crumpled page and smoothed it out with hands that shook. His silence was the last straw; the landlady boiled over:

"It's you that'll 'ave to 'clear out'! A week to-day—so now yer know! The card goes up in the winder to-morrer."

"Then you'd better clean it first," said Torquil, in his sudden relief at the turn of affairs. "And the room, too, for a change!"

He sat down and took up his pen, deaf to the woman's parting tirade. At last, he heard the door slam. He tried to collect his scattered thoughts, but the vision had fled. He wrote a line and crossed it through impatiently. Brain and body felt empty. He awoke to the fact of the latter's needs. No food had passed his lips since breakfast. Gathering up the littered sheets, too weary now to read them through, he bundled them into the nearest drawer and gave his attention to the tray. He very rarely fed in the house, but a cold on his chest and the rain outside had overcome his objection. Now he was regretting the impulse. Beastly, that tepid, half-cooked chop! He broke off a mouthful of bread and found that he was ravenous. In a few minutes the plate was empty save for a clean-picked bone.

He rolled himself a cigarette, lit it, and threw up the window. The evening breeze had dispersed the rain, and a longing for fresh air seized hm. As he stepped out into

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the night, he caught the quavering, mournful notes of the cornet in the next street. The old man worked in a circle, its centre the public-house that topped the row of flat-faced dwellings to which Torquil's was a sample. Now he was coming back again to the starting-point of his adventure.

"Like myself," thought the young author in a sudden wave of bitterness.

He quickened his stride, pursued anew by the old sordid memories. He was filled with a hatred of narrow streets, damp and sticky, tainted by the smell of unwashed humanity. Poverty—how he loathed it! He passed a shuttered butcher's shop, from which escaped a sour smell of sawdust and raw meat, and a sharp spasm of nausea seized him —revived horror of boyhood days. He swerved to the left and found himself in the glare of the Vauxhall Bridge Road. Here was a sense of light and movement replacing that of stagnation, but the crowd on the pavement and in the trams held the same note of unending struggle for existence in the teeth of want. Reaching Victoria, he pressed on, already aware of a lightening in the moist atmosphere, a promise of leafy solitudes, the high branches straining up to a sky unbound and alive with stars. But when he had crossed the open space that holds a perpetual maze of traffic on which the low white arch looks down with an almost Oriental calm, he felt a sudden check to desire. Within lay the silent Park, yet he hesitated on the threshold.

A white mist rose like a phantom, twisting its coils about the trees; a brooding darkness hung over the grass. Close together, whispering, a pair of lovers stole past him, seeking those mysterious shades. They shamed him in his loneliness. Outwardly he would scoff at passion, but akin to his haunting fear of failure, was a secret dread of unknown depths. He shrank from such knowledge as only a man can who is drawn by the thing he hates, lured by its evil mystery. The Park would be full of the murmuring sounds that kindled his imagination; of figures pressed side by

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side, of a girl's checked laugh or the sting of a kiss. Nervously he wheeled around and moved down the broad pavement, already drying and patched with white, for the moon was rising above the clouds.

The chain of lamps in Piccadilly, that skipped downhill and up again to join in a single arrow of light, pointed his path. He was swept across with a little crowd that broke the moving line of traffic. But the vague restraint of hurrying people chafed him. He shook himself free and, racked by a fit of coughing, set his face towards Park Lane.

It held a peculiar appeal to him, a part of his intimate dream of success. Here he would live when the dream came true. In a boyish mood, one afternoon, he had gone so far as to choose his house. It would not be a tall mansion, but one of those children of the Lane that cluster, wide-eyed, near Upper Brook Street, in between their grown-up neighbours. A little house in Park Lane —that would shelter a great author. He saw himself writing there, at a window that watched the growth of the trees and compared them to the puny mortals strutting forth to Church Parade in all their peacock finery. Torquil would never be one of these. His hatred of Society had been steadily fostered since the days of that unforgettable year at Cambridge, when he had caught at his first success—a popularity won by brains—and held it for a brief span only to find himself hurled forth, an outcast through his own folly. Those leisurely youths who had offered him friendship, even asked him to their homes, then had dropped him when the crash came—now, they should see how much he cared! He pictured himself as a demi-god, utterly unapproachable but holding the listening ear of the world—a world thirsty for his writing. This was the supreme obsession but it held the germ of a lesser one. That stout, blustering, sandy man, whose very paternity he doubted and who dared to call him a "young wastrel" and bully his fragile mother, *he* should see what brains could achieve. He despised brains. Well, he *should see!*

Torquil's rancour fell away. He had come to the wider

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space abutting on quiet Hertford Street, that slipped away to his right mysteriously into ebony shadows. The moonlight filled the immediate foreground, a silver lake cut by an island where some benefactor has erected an ornate drinking-trough for the friends of man, and where Park Lane, with a sudden flutter of irregular, creamy houses, emerges from obscurity, like a dainty dame shaking her skirts.

The traffic hugged the Park rails; an air of aloofness hung about the tall mansions that gazed across lumbering bus and rackety taxi, and dreamed of torch and sedan chair in an age when manners outweighed money.

Torquil's revolt at class distinctions was confined to the present generation. Where history and tradition stepped in, the personal factor no longer counted. Romance belonged to those past days and the spirit of adventure. A man could carve his own fortunes irrespective of his birth, with the help of a trusty sword, glib tongue and handsome presence. There was Romance in the air tonight, in the spring softness after rain. He stood, for a moment, indulging his fancy: the wet road that suggested water lapping against marble steps beneath the huddled palaces. A big, black car stole up, noiseless as a gondola, and was moored close to the further curb. No one descended—more mystery! Torquil started to cross the lagoon of moonlit macadam.

"If it's too deep, I can swim," he thought, smiling at his own folly, yet with a real sense of adventure.

So vivid was the illusion that he drew an instinctive breath of relief whon he reached the far pavement. His eyes raked the black car. Low-built, with its closed hood, it only needed the silver prow thrusting up beyond the *felse* and the chauffeur, rigid at the wheel, to rise and bend to his oar.

As Torquil came abreast with it, the door of the house was opened wide, a servant emerged and flung down a roll of carpet, swiftly uncoiled and aided by a dexterous kick. It spanned the narrow, gleaming, path between the steps

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and the "gondola" like a magic bridge, deep in moss.

Torquil, checked in his advance by this unforeseen event, was involved suddenly in an absurd calculation. Should he stride across it, step on the carpet, or wait for the lawful owner to pass? That pampered magnificent whose buckled shoes were sacrosanct.

Before he had time to decide the question, a figure moved through the lighted doorway and paused to fling a tasselled corner of her black cloak across one shoulder. Against the sombre depths of the velvet, her raised arm flashed like marble; her face was ivory under the moon, the bare forehead cut by a band of jet framing the arched brows. But, above this, her hair was aflame, drawn into a gleaming knot of copper on her shapely head. Her glance, cool and incurious, as she passed, flickered over Torquil. There was pride in every line of her features, and a superb self-assurance, though he judged her to be barely twenty. As she stepped into the car with a flutter of black tulle skirts he saw a single note of colour, the scarlet heels of her satin shoes. Then she was gone, swallowed up in that travesty of a gondola. It moved out noiselessly into the lake and sailed past the little island.

Torquil was roused unpleasantly by a jerk beneath his feet and a grumbling order from the footman who was trying to roll up the carpet, on which the dreamer had infringed. He had stepped forward instinctively to watch the car swing round. Now, as quickly, he retreated, filled with a gathering resentment. The servant, too, had taken him for one of those shabby loiterers who hang about the abodes of the great where an awning or carpet announces a party: the poor wistfully looking on at the pageantry of wealth.

It emphasized the gulf between Torquil's ambitions and his life. Would he always remain a spectator, a portionless, unknown man? Heedless of where he went to escape the footman's insolent stare and the memory of those cold young eyes meeting his eager glance with disdain, he swerved off down Hertford Street, welcoming the quiet

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shadows. But he could not banish that chiselled face with its startling contrast of creamy skin, drawn-back, vivid hair and its rich sable setting. She reminded him of a torch, the light flaming in the breeze, sparks about her little feet.

He tramped on, finding relief in the swing of his long, supple limbs. She was like—who was it she resembled? Some one Torquil had once known. Or was this, too, a fantasy born of the mysterious night?

He found himself in a strange place and looked around him wonderingly; at the paved space with its shuttered shops and its unfamiliar rural air, a little market tucked away in the heart of Mayfair. The name was posted up on the wall, "Shepherd's Market." Torquil's mood insensibly lightened; he was caught by another fleeting fancy.

Had there ever been shepherds here? Shepherds with snowy flocks of sheep, marshalled by a shaggy dog, faded cloaks on their lean shoulders, staff in hand, or a reed-pipe pressed to their wind-roughened lips, drawing echoes from the cobbles? Had they drifted down a Piccadilly that joined up with the fields and talked to the pedlars who eased their packs on the high shelf still facing the clubs?

The lines of his mouth relaxed. Ghostly shapes stole up and blotted out the little shops. From far away came the faint toot of a motor-horn, sweet and piercing, that shivered off into silence. It brought vividly before him the picture of a royal coach, galloping madly out of London; Charles, a spaniel on his knee, spurning Whitehall and the cold Queen for an "Orange girl"—his dainty Nell—awaiting him in old Chelsea.

A little breeze danced across the low roofs and he bared his head, letting it play on his smooth, black hair that held nothing of the rusty hue peculiar to the Northerner. With his faintly olive skin, and restless, dark-browed eyes, that could light up at the spur of excitement and sink to a slumbering brown flecked by little hazel specks, a keen observer would have guessed at a strain of Latin blood. It showed, too, in his varying moods, his love of self-anaylsis, keen

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vision and swift brain. But in his dogged perseverance, his deep reserve towards his neighbour, and his bitter enforced chastity, tinged with a morbid dread of passion, there was nothing of Southern light-heartedness. His build conformed to the British type, broad-shouldered, long-limbed. He bore the lingering results of drill, with a slight and unconscious swagger— a suggestion of putties and buckled belt—that seems to mark the new army. Now, as he smiled, pursuing his way among the phantoms of the past, his lean face looked boyish. He was swept by a sudden love of London, with its hidden treasure of dark by-ways, its history and its romance. He was a living part of it; of that ancient mysterious place, of a million lives and dreams and hopes, but still his own architect, building up the walls of the future around his defiant, lonely soul.

Confident of his own powers, he lacked the foundation stone of money and influence. Once he could get a fair start, no obstacle on earth would stop him. If a man kept his eyes fixed solely on his goal, was ruthless to himself and others, resisting all weakness of the flesh, human ties and youthful pleasures, could fight poverty, hunger, depression, success must surely come his way.

As he passed out through the archway, he paused to make room for a crippled figure, swinging towards him on crutches. Thank God, he was spared that! He had come unscathed through the years of war, mentally and physically. He had faced death, he could face life. A sudden exhilaration seized him. With the blood pulsing through his veins, he could have shouted aloud for joy. The memory of his landlady, with her drink-sodden countenance, rose up like some Hogarthian jest. It was over too; she was turning him out. To the chance of finding some wind-swept garret with the silence of the roofs around him, swung above the mighty city. The hackneyed scheme of this background to genius brought a laugh to his lips. What a plagiarist he was! He might as well serve in a chemist's shop and imagine himself a potential Keats. He grinned, then his face grew wistful. If only Merriman took his book! He

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could say farewell to journalism in the petty form he loathed almost as much as the search for it; to short stories that were a trick to capture editor and reader but an insult to his powers.

"Fluff!" He cried the word aloud

A painted face was turned to him. The owner smiled and hesitated, but, oblivious, he passed on into the stir of Piccadilly, and headed homewards, ready for sleep, to wake, clear-brained, on the morrow. To wake and work. What a golden thing work could be, spinning a thread like a busy spider out of self that would drift forth into the world and harness a man to success....

Hyde Park Corner, the whispering Park, Victoria with its stream of traffic and the distant rumble and hiss of trains as Torquil chose a street behind it. Then silence, dirt, the little houses, with close-packed humanity, rows on rows, greasy doorsteps, poverty and murky air. But above his head the stars shone, and on his feet were silver wings. Only outside the public-house at the corner of his road, did the thought—the prosaic thought—come to him that Shepherd's Market most probably owed its name to some hoary capitalist.

He refused to believe it. As well suggest that the flame maiden who had stepped into the waiting gondola had gone to tryst with a base lover and was now pressed against his heart, the wealth of her copper hair unloosed from its close filet, the proud lips parted in voluptuous curves.

He felt for his latch-key and opened the door. As he closed it, in the letter-box, he saw a single envelope and drew it forth. Addressed to himself, the typewriting suggested a bill, and he carried it into his room with a faint sinking of the heart, for he owed money to a tailor. He lighted the gas and reluctantly opened the letter, unfolding the page. For a moment his breath caught in his throat. At last! He read with incredulous eyes. The publisher, in a guarded letter, admitted merit in "the book" and named an hour for an interview.

Torquil read it through twice. Then he slipped down

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on his knees and folded his arms across the sheet where it lay shining on the table. He hid his hot face on his sleeve, feeling the shamed tears well up.

"I've done it!" he said chokingly; and praised the god he found in himself.

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CHAPTER II

WHEN the Merrimans decided to take a house in the country as well as the one they had long rented in Bloomsbury, Josephine indulged in dreams of some old-world manor hidden away sleepily in a walled garden. It would be Tudor or Jacobean, with low ceilings and little steps that tripped up the unwary, powder closets and latticed windows. But her husband only laughed at her.

His practical mind foresaw endless dilapidations and a lack of modern comfort that would impair his object: rest. His business tied him to London. He could rarely find time for a prolonged holiday; but week-ends were another matter, and the social side of his work could be fitted in pleasantly by bringing his friends to his country-house.

Josephine welcomed the idea but held her own views on the choice of abode. Eventually they compromised by an early nineteenth-century house which lent itself to Chippendale chairs, and where lustres could hold a place but concealed electric light.

A walled garden clinched the matter, together with an added joy in the shape of a little stone pavilion, at the corner butting on two roads, reared above the moss-grown coping and approached by five unseen steps.

"Five is my lucky number," Josephine pronounced gravely.

She christened the little look-out tower "Sister Ann." She also found a roomy attic, deep in cobwebs, suitable for Bluebeard's chamber.

Merriman's "discoveries" centred round two bathrooms, recently added, and a garage that had been built for

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the purpose and was not a sodden and draughty stable. They had suffered the usual disillusions of "orders to view" and agents' descriptions.

The house was built on the side of a hill with woods to the north and east of it, a protection from the cold winds. The rising ground in the rear successfully cut off the view of an ugly, but useful, little town with a station on the main line. Josephine accepted this neighbour with a divided mind. It was convenient for Richard, but it added a suburban touch. She could have borne with slow trains for the sake of a country siding and two white gates suggesting danger to anyone who crossed the line.

"Only forty-five minutes to town," the husband would say cheerfully, a twinkle in his deep-set eyes as he caught Josephine's expression.

He was devoted to this woman nearly twenty years his junior; and his love partook of a suspicion of fatherliness which prompted him to tease her like a favourite daughter. He rejoiced in her youth and the subtle strain of romanticism he found in her. Wisely, he realized the gulf between their ages and allowed her a free rein to her fancies, instead of permitting his burden of years to weigh on her fragile shoulders. He had his reward in the hours of trouble, when she gave him the wealth of tenderness and the eager compassion so often blunted by the insidious passage of Time. They were a very happy couple who had won through understanding.

To compensate the disadvantage of their nearness to London, Josephine had only to stand at the front windows and be filled with a sense of peace and wonder. Here was "*real* country." The wide expanse of wooded vale splashed by the grey of some old farm like a lover's knot in the twisting lanes, was beautiful when the sun poured down on fields of corn and grassy meadows, and full of mystery when the rain wreathed the far-off hills in shadows. A little hamlet was tucked away in a fold beneath the sloping paddock that bordered the croquet lawn, and the spire of a church, with a weather-cock—that never moved but fondly

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pointed due south through all the seasons—rose above a spinney of firs marking the Merriman's boundary.

Their neighbours were few, but included a certain author of repute, whose work Merriman had published in his early days, to lose later, but who still remained a friend. They were linked by tastes in common and by that peculiar esteem which often results from a healed quarrel between two Englishmen. They never alluded to the rupture, but it added a spice when they disagreed in some literary argument.

David Heron's work now stood above minor criticism. He ranked as a foremost essayist. It had been Merriman's misfortune to overlook what seemed at the time a remote possibility. They had fallen out over terms, and Heron had taken his work elsewhere, to achieve a success that was not due solely to large sales but was based on the merit of his writing. A peculiarly modest man, he refused to have his head turned, avoided Society, and gave himself up to his two loves: those of his work and of the country. He had bought, before the Merrimans came to Westwick, a picturesque little dwelling which had started life as a wayside inn, falling into dsrepute. It was pure Jacobean, with a timbered front and beamed ceilings, and Heron had cleverly enlarged it by linking the original structure to the barn that huddled against its side, now transformed into his study. The addition of windows, a deep fire-place and an oak floor had worked wonders, without destroying its ancient charm. Bats still sheltered occasionally in the vault of the raftered roof, to issue forth after sunset and swoop down on the pergolas where the roses clung in heavy clusters. Sitting in his study window, Heron's gaze would follow the curves of the two approaching lines of poles, wreathed in delicate foliage that narrowed round a plot of turf to extend again—in the shape of an hour-glass—and shelter a small paved court, where teak-wood seats found a home, ruthlessly crushing the tiny plants that had seeded themselves in the cracks of the stones. Through the gap beyond he could see the old orchard, a mass of blossom in

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the spring, and always a restful note of green and grey, with the gnarled boughs grotesquely twisted above the grass.

To Josephine, Heron's house was perfect. Merriman might openly swear when he hit his head against the beam that the owner had learnt to avoid, which traversed the low-roofed hall, once the bar-parlour of the inn; he might grumble about "inconvenience" as he swarmed up the steep, twisting stairs, but, to her, the deep ingle nook where the logs lay piled by the open gate, with a cunning stone ledge above for pewter pots and jars of baccy, brought a whiff of bygone days that stirred her quick imagination.

Heron, his strong, ugly face in shadow, would squat on a three-legged stool which he swore had belonged to a local witch and draw word-pictures for her: of lonely strangers lured to the inn, robbed and murdered; of highwaymen dicing away their ill-gotten gains, smuggled brandy at their elbows, their horses hidden in the barn; of coiners, ruffians and broken gallants lying on the floor above to snatch a few hours' needed sleep in this haunt far off the high roads down a lane unknown to county maps.

She was an eager listener—that stimulus to creative thought. In return, Heron, against the grain, would fill a gap at her table, at short notice, when she had guests; talk Merriman into a good temper if business went wrong in town; be a neighbour in its fullest sense, some one on whom she could rely. Theirs was that rare friendship which scorns advice and interference. If Heron liked his study dusty, his pewter the colour of old lead, and allowed himself to be cheated by the ancient couple who served his needs—his early peas filched and sold, his meals left cooling on the table when, utterly absorbed in work, he confounded the hours of lunch and dinner—that was the author's own concern. Help him she did in many ways, most of all by her sympathy and steady, tranquil affection. But only when he asked her opinion did she proffer a suggestion.

Her husband slyly chaffed her about Heron's obvious

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admiration. She had "drawn the old hermit out of his shell." But he, too, found their neighbour useful. Ten years younger than Merriman, Heron's outlook was far less cramped by the early traditions of publishing. He divined the trend of public opinion towards the literature of the day. Merriman might argue with him, but he valued his friend's judgment, above all, his fastidious instinct. He was rarely at fault as a critic.

Josephine sometimes wondered what Westwick Place would be without him. He had slipped insensibly into their lives during the past six years, when, from making the house a week-end resort with a longer spell in the summer, it had become their real home, Bloomsbury but a *pied-a-terre*.

The thought flashed across her now as she stood at the foot of a short ladder, handing up the strips of cloth whilst Heron patiently nailed a creeper on the flat bosom of "Sister Ann." It was a rare kind of clematis that her neighbour had found for her and planted on her last birthday and a source of anxiety to them both. Would it stand the Westwick winds that swept down from the Chilterns in the winter months and flooded the garden, in despite of the woods and the high old wall?

Heron discarded a blunted nail.

"Sister Ann is uncommonly hard. It's a quality that sometimes results from a forlorn and protracted patience. I've often wondered if she had a secret romance of her own."

"She *will* have, when she's wreathed in flowers," Josephine laughed at him.

"Like Carrie at the Hunt Ball," Heron suggested wickedly.

"Don't insult Sister Ann! Fancy comparing her to Carrie." Josephine turned her head. Her quick ear had caught the sound, far off, of steps on the gravel. "Oh, David, here she is! Why ever did you speak of her?"

"Telepathy—or the instinct of love." Heron viciously

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drove in a nail. It was an old joke between them that Carrie set her cap for him.

"She must have seen you over the wall." His fellow-gardener, on tip-toe, help up a last strip of cloth. "You'll have to come down and help me, David. I can't tackle her alone."

"I'll bet you sixpence she's come to sell something or other, or else to borrow teaspoons or the lawn-mower."

"And she'll talk of pigs," said Josephine. "A subject that always unnerves me. Tell me, quick, how many piglets can a pig have—a generous pig?"

Heron's laugh shattered the peace.

"Now you've done it," his hostess scolded. "I might have pretended you weren't here. I suppose I ought to go and meet her?"

"Why?" He resented being left. "She has legs, hasn't she? There's precious little doubt about it—the ugliest pair *I* ever saw."

"David!" Josephine rebuked him. "She can't help the shape, poor girl."

"Well, she might, at least, cover them up," Heron grumbled from the ladder.

"She'll hear you! Do get down, David, and be as pleasant as you can." Josephine stooped to coaxing. "We have to put up with her, because of her dear old people. I always feel sorry for them."

"*I* don't. It's their fault that Carrie ever came to Westwick. The Colonel quarrelled with his brother for forty years, then accepted the daughter as a loving legacy. Rank weakness, I call it. And he lets her rule the whole house."

"He's too old to stand her temper. He takes the line of least resistance. Carrie is too much for *me*, so I don't wonder he gives in. And his wife is almost an invalid. I think you are very hard-hearted."

"If you look at me so severely I shall drop the hammer on you," said Heron. But he scrambled down, penitent.

Up the wide gravel path, between the space devoted to

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fruit and the wall with its herbaceous border, came the lank figure of a girl with a basket on her arm. Her long face, studded with freckles, was crowned by a battered hat of limp straw held together by a rusty black ribbon.

She wore a short and shapeless skirt that sagged at the back from a petersham belt with a regimental buckle, and above this was a cotton shirt open at her bony neck, which was burnt to the curious ginger colour that the sun leaves on a coarse white skin. Wisps of carroty hair escaped from a net that crushed the remainder tucked into a bun supporting her hat. It added the last touch to a deliberate contempt for fashion.

Josephine advanced to meet her with a forced cheerfulness, but Carrie ignored her pleasant greeting and unburdened herself of a grievance.

"I've been looking for you *everywhere!* The servants said you were on the lawn. Oh, how do you do, Mr. Heron?" Her sour face suddenly brightened as the author joined the pair. "I thought you must have gone to town? We haven't seen you for weeks."

"I've been working," said Heron, shaking hands.

"At a new book? What's the name?"

"It hasn't got so far as that." Heron wisely temporized.

Carrie stared at him, with a gathering suspicion.

"But don't you write the name first?"

Josephine hurried to the rescue and created a diversion.

"Eggs?" She peered into the basket and brought disaster on herself.

"Yes. I thought you might like to buy some. Mrs. Delaporte's still away and I've a dozen to spare this week. I heard your fowls weren't laying well, so I tramped across to give you the chance."

Heron glanced at Josephine's face, and promptly shouldered the burden.

"*I'll* take them."

"No," said his hostess. "I really need some." She had guessed his unselfish purpose.

"Oh, that's all right," Carrie remarked, a gleam of

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cupidity in her eye. "I've plenty more for Mr. Heron. We can use the pickled ones. These are new-laid—at market price."

Josephine limply acquiesced. It cost her an effort to inquire if her visitor wished for tea. To her relief, Carrie declined the invitation.

"I must get back. I'm very busy—a new litter of pigs last night."

"How exciting!" Heron smiled. He dared not look at Josephine. There was a quiver in his voice as he added solemnly, "How many?"

"Thirteen," said Carrie proudly.

"Not a very lucky number," Heron suggested as they turned in the direction of the house.

"I'm not troubled by superstition." Carrie gave a little snort.

"But then you're so fortunate." Heron stared straight before him. "You have only to wave a wand, like Circe, and your pig-stys overflow. It's a rare gift."

He repressed a shudder as the girl advanced a heavy boot and deliberately crushed a fat slug that had wandered out from the border. She seemed to enjoy the proceeding.

They moved up the path together, Mrs. Merriman in the centre. Heron was caught by the contrast of her delicate, pensive face and the bony profile of the girl with its high-bridged nose and sullen mouth. Josephine always reminded him of moonlight on a summer stream. Her charm was not of regular beauty, but of elusive mood and expression. Her own sex did not admire her—which, perhaps, was fortunate, as friendship rarely survives envy—but she appealed to the type of man to whom fragility and grace bring a wistful charm and provocation. Heron would have died for her, but he kept the secret locked in his breast.

"You've plenty of sunflowers," said Carrie abruptly.

"Are you fond of them?"

Josephine paused before a royal group that turned golden faces to their god.

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"I'm fond of the seeds for my fowls. Ours have done badly this summer."

Josephine took the hint:

"Then you must have some of mine."

"Thanks. I'll come and fetch them later. With those damsons you promised me. You remember?"

Her hostess nodded. Heron opened the door in the wall with unnecessary vigour, his ugly face like that of a mastiff annoyed by some puny mongrel.

"I hear you're taking riding lessons," he remarked as they crossed the lawn. "Going to hunt next winter?"

"No." Carrie gave him a glance at once shrewd and suspicious. "Now Uncle Tom's given up his motor, it's difficult to get about, and I thought I could ride the cob when he wasn't wanted for the cart." She went on, rather hurriedly, under Josephine's steady eyes. "Mrs. Delaporte, meanwhile let's me exercise her mare—of course always with the groom. He's teaching me to ride."

"That good-looking groom?" Heron smiled.

"Do you think him good-looking?" said Carrie swiftly.

"The village does," was Heron's reply. "He can sit a horse well, too. I spoke to him the other day. He was servant at the Front to a cavalry officer, he told me, and he finds life rather dull in our sleepy Westwick. Despite the attraction of village maidens!" He was conscious of the sudden flush that stained the girl's freckled skin at this innocent remark. He changed the subject, slightly disgusted, and recalling a chance phrase of the old woman who waited on him, but dismissed the notion as local gossip. "How is your aunt keeping?"

"All right—except for a cold and fussing for fear Uncle Tom gets it. As if a summer cold mattered!"

"Still it isn't pleasant," said Josephine, "at your aunt's age, and she's delicate."

"It's her own fault," Carrie protested. "She's too fond of muffling up and having fires in all weathers. Fresh air is what she wants." She drew in a deep breath and

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seemed to expand sideways with no quiver of her flat bosom.

Heron studied her with distaste.

The throb of a car broke across the silence that followed, and Josephine started.

"That's Richard!" She quickened her steps.

But before they could reach the house the owner had arrived in the hall. He surged through the French windows that opened out of the library, a tall man, massively built, imposing in his town clothes.

"You there, Josephine? Hullo, Heron, how are you? And Miss Brackney—quite a party!" He greeted the group heartily, then turned again to his wife. "My dear, I've forgotten the fish."

"Oh, Richard!" Her smiling face clouded over. "Not the salmon for Sunday supper? What shall I do?"

"I know." He looked ashamed of himself. "I was so rushed at the last moment I forgot to call at the shop. But cheer up! The Ormes have failed us. He telephoned to explain that the child's down with whooping-cough. So we shall be by ourselves this week-end. Except for a man who doesn't matter in the least."

"Who?" She was still engrossed in the business of Sunday's meal.

"A nice boy, very good-looking," he was teasing her now, "for you to flirt with! Then you'll forget the fish. 'Better a dinner with herbs, where love is——'" He paused. "You go on, Heron. I'm not strong at quotations."

"Than a stalled ox fed on salmon," the author finished solemnly.

"But that's *quite* wrong!" corrected Carrie.

Heron, catching Josephine's eye, gave a sudden hoot of mirth. Carrie scowled at the pair.

"Never believe a man who writes," Merriman warned her, his eyes twinkling. "Put your faith in some one solid —like myself." He gave his chest a resounding thump. "Now I've smashed my glasses!" He hunted for them and his face cleared. "Not this time!"

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"But who *is* the visitor?" asked Josephine, exasperated.

"Torquil—that young author whose book you read, and criticized." The publisher became serious. "I rather want a talk with him and he looked as if a blow of fresh air wouldn't do him any harm. He's thin as a lath—you can feed him up."

"And hand him over, surfeited, to Richard for a new agreement." Heron got in his little dig.

"It's time you went back to Sister Ann," said his hostess severely.

Carrie, who had been lingering on the chance of his company over the fields, was seized with a fresh inspiration.

"I'll bring round the eggs after dinner, Mr. Heron, if I may? And borrow a book for Uncle Tom."

Josephine glanced at her husband. He read the appeal in her eyes

"But you're dining here, aren't you, David? I haven't seen you for a week and I want your advice in a certain matter."

"Thanks," said the author. "If you're sure——"

Josephine interrupted him.

"Quite. Richard can go short as a punishment for forgetting the salmon. He's always talking about his figure!"

"We'll toss up." Merriman smiled. There was never a scarcity at his table.

His wife, meanwhile, had turned to Carrie, who was making signs of departure.

"Must you go? Give my love to your people. You can find your way out, can't you? I want a quiet word with Richard."

"Oh, don't trouble," Carrie rejoined. "Do you know that you've got a smut on the left side of your nose? I thought you'd like to be told of it."

Said Heron to the world at large:

"I once warned a fair lady that she had her 'placky hole' open—isn't that what you call it?—and she turned round and slapped my face. Since then I've restrained my

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kindness." His eyes wandered over Carrie. "Would it lead to a personal assault if I said your boot-lace was untied?"

Josephine frowned at him. Carrie was looking venomous.

"Now!" His lips shaped the word as the girl bent down and knotted the lace, with a glimpse of the famous legs and a limp cotton petticoat edged with draggled embroidery. The feminine touch was too much for Heron. He turned away hurriedly. "I must finish my job before it gets dark. Good-bye, Miss Brackney." He escaped.

They watched his thick-set but active figure vanish through the arched gate. Carrie, no longer buoyed by hope, departed abruptly. Josephine slipped a hand through her husband's arm. A thrush on a high bough was pouring forth his evening song. Above the spire of the church a pink cloud hovered, and, overhead, were its companions drawing together in fleecy ripples that promised wind.

Merriman smiled down at his wife.

"Well, old lady, what is it?"

"Nothing! I wanted you to myself. How has business gone this week?"

"Pretty fair—the usual worry of delay and high prices. Paper gone up again. But every one's in the same state. Torquil's book is selling well."

"Good. I remember it. Clever but slightly cynical. Is Torquil his real name?"

"No."

"Then what am I to call him?"

"'Torquil.'" Merriman laughed. "He won't be known by any other. I gather he's quarrelled with his people and cut adrift. He's very ambitious and prefers to be judged by his work alone. I think you'll find him interesting." He went on thoughtfully, "He believes himself to be a genius. Time will prove if he's right. Frome, who read his book for me, was unusually enthusiastic, and it seems in for a big sale. It's hit the spirit of the moment, with strikes and labour difficulties—Torquil is out for government by the people, abolishing class distinctions.

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But I'm not sure if he'll *last*. The older I grow, the more I see that talent must be balanced by character in the case of an author. That is, for an enduring success. Torquil's conceit may be that of a youth. He's certainly hard-working —has half-finished another book—but there's something about him I don't like, although he has great charm and a magnetic personality. Perhaps the truth of the matter is that he's young and I'm getting on, to that stage when a man's mind stiffens as well as his limbs and he resents the thrust of the new generation. Torquil will brook no advice, although I've made him several concessions and been generous in the matter of terms."

"I'm quite sure I shan't like him." Josephine slipped her hand still further through her husband's arm with an impulse of protection.

"Oh, yes, you will." Merriman chuckled. "He's distinctly exhilarating, out of the common, and in earnest. You'll be swept along like a reed on the flood of his enthusiasms."

"Not if he doesn't treat you well." They had reached the hedge that bounded the meadow and she stood on tiptoe as she spoke to gather a sprig of honeysuckle and, turning, fastened it in his coat. "There!" She smiled up at him.

He took her face between his hands, stooped, and kissed it gratefully.

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CHAPTER III

SAVE for the faint slur of the brake steadying the two-seater, the silence was absolute in the steep and shady lane. To the left was a thinned-out wood, and, between the trees, Torquil could see inquisitive shafts of sunlight, like spirits on some treasure hunt, turning the holes of the birches to silver and the carpet of leaf-mould to copper and gold. So hushed was the air that he started when a bird escaped from the high boughs and flashed across before the car with a flutter of black and white wings. A magpie. "One for sorrow!" His superstition recoiled from the thought.

"Two!" The word escaped his lips as a second magpie followed its mate.

The chauffeur glanced sideways.

"Beg pardon, sir?"

"It's nothing," said Torquil discomfited. "Is that the house?" His eyes had detected the angle of the long wall with Sister Ann patiently on the look-out for "some one coming."

"Yes, sir. That's the garden." He slowed down to take the curve.

Torquil felt a rising excitement. He was gazing at the little pavilion when a figure appeared at the open casement.

"There's Mrs. Merriman, sir," said the chauffeur, and brought the car to a halt.

Torquil, too surprised for a moment to remember his manners, stared at her, then hurriedly raised his hat, as she greeted him by name. He had pictured the publisher's wife in his mind: a stout middle-aged woman dressed in a

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style suggestive of money and fully prepared to patronize him. He saw a delicate, pointed face with wide, grey eyes and ashen hair waved above a low brow that was fresh and unlined as a child's. She wore a simple washing frock, with no ornaments save a string of curiously carved ivory beads. The loose sleeves fell back from her elbows, and her slender but rounded throat was bare. She made him think of the West wind emprisoned in the magic tower.

"Would you like to get out here and join me, or drive up to the house?" she asked him with a smile. Torquil's reply was to spring to the ground. "There's a door in the wall a few yards up. I'll meet you." The vision vanished.

The chauffeur directed him, then moved on with the luggage. Torquil, more embarrassed than he would have been by the formal reception for which he had braced himself, stood staring at the closed door that showed no latch but only a keyhole, his dignity a shade ruffled. How absurdly young she was to be old Richard Merriman's wife! His shyness made him aggressive, even to the extent of mistrusting the welcome in her voice. He heard the creak of the inner handle, and Josephine stood in her lavender dress against the background of currant bushes.

"How do you do?" She held out her hand. It felt lost in his strong fingers, light as a leaf that had slipped from a willow. "Richard has gone to Fream Magna. He won't be back until dinner. I was to make his excuses." She led the way into the garden. "It's so blowy on the lawn, I think we shall be happier here." She was studying him, beneath her lashes, aware of his gauche attitude, but interested by the contrast of his youth and vitality and the somewhat sombre lines of his face.

Torquil, with an effort, recovered the use of his tongue.

"It's charming." He looked about him. "What lovely flowers!"

The herbaceous border was ablaze with colour, the effect heightened by the background of grey stones. Bees, heavily laden with pollen, blundered from the tasselled heads of the hollyhocks to the quivering spires of the

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Canterbury bells, reared like miniature pagodas; and the air was full of their vibrant humming, with a sharper note from lesser insects—the warm, exciting song of summer.

"The delphiniums have done well this season." Josephine paused before a group. "This is my favourite one, blue turning into mauve. I'm absurdly proud of them."

"Why 'absurdly'?" asked Torquil as he looked down at the massed spike which seemed alive with butterflies clustering on a single stem.

"Just as if I made them myself," she explained merrily.

"Well, they wouldn't be here except for you."

"No, but they'd be somewhere else. Nature would see to that. I can't assume the airs of creation!"

His flexible brows drew together.

"But you might say that of everything. This old wall, for instance. It was built up by man's labour and foresight to withstand Time. Yet he didn't make the stone, only hewed it to fit his purpose."

"That doesn't absolve us from gratitude." Josephine caught him up, obstinate in her secret thought.

"I doubt if the workmen took your view when they sweated under the heavy blocks." In Torquil's voice was a note of resentment. "We pay with our lives for the privilege of improving on the raw material. A fair exchange, isn't it?"

Her grey eyes searched his face. He saw that they held what the gipsies call a "star"; that blurring of the pupil into outward shafts of colour which contract and expand with every emotion as though pierced by an inner light. He noted it, his thoughts elsewhere, with the subconscious precision which grows upon those who write.

It seemed to Josephine that they had embarked too hastily on a subject that bordered upon religious belief. She evaded further argument.

"We're getting into deep waters. Come and meet Sister Ann." She smiled as she saw him glance up the path, in evident expectation of an addition to the party. A sudden gust of wind caught her. "Oh!" she cried. Her hands

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went up to her ruffled hair and the lavender skirts were wound tightly about her.

She looked too frail to withstand the onslaught. Instinctively Torquil's hand shot out and grasped her elbow.

"What a blow!"

Through the crook of her arm, she nodded. Suddenly his hold relaxed, a dull colour rushed to the surface of his smooth olive skin.

"I beg your pardon! I thought——" He stammered, conscious of the familiar action.

"That I was going over the wall? I nearly did!" She set him at ease, pitying him in his shyness, and went on to explain her fanciful name for the little pavilion. "Here we are!"

She mounted the steps, Torquil in her wake, quick to absorb the first impression.

The floor, covered with rush matting, looked cool under the light that poured in from the two windows; a pair of deep wicker chairs with bright cushions suggested rest and there was even a little bookshelf high above the folding table.

"How jolly!" cried Torquil. He added impulsively, "What a lovely place to write in!"

"Ah, you must cultivate Sister Ann. She would like to see herself in print." She settled herself in one of the chairs and waved her guest to the other. "She wants to hear about your book." From the litter on the table she gathered up a strip of muslin, fitting a thimble on her finger; an absurd little thimble that looked as if it belonged to a child.

"Has Mr. Merriman told you about it?" Torquil asked cautiously. His eyes followed her swift stitches.

"Yes. I hear it's selling well." She looked up at him and smiled. "I was one of your first readers. Richard brought me the manuscript." She was conscious of a sudden silence. Torquil's lips were compressed. "He's not going to ask me my opinion," she thought, amused but compassionate. Generously she relieved the strain. "I enjoyed it." She hesitated, remembering her position as Merriman's

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wife and her duty to him. "Though I thought it, in parts, a shade bitter."

"Life's bitter," said the author.

Startled, she lowered her needlework. Torquil was staring out of the window at the wood that flanked the lane. The boughs sighed in the wind and a little swirl of leaves rose up from the dusty road and danced wildly. In the hush that succeeded, a pigeon's note could be heard, a crooning call of love. Torquil yielded to its spell.

"But it's beautiful, too," he amended. With a sudden inconsequence he added, "I saw two magpies coming here."

"That means 'Mirth'!" Josephine smiled. "Are you superstitious?"

"Very," said Torquil.

"I must get Élise to tell your fortune. Élise is my Brittany maid—there's a strain of the Celt in her. She's really wonderful at cards and she has strong instincts about people. She seems to read their characters."

"At first sight, do you mean?" Torquil was interested.

"Yes, and so accurately. She never swerves a hairbreadth from her original conclusion, which is a more unusual trait. I think we all form first impressions but are apt to modify them, especially if friendship follows. It's an instinctive loyalty—a desire to overlook weakness. You don't agree with me?" She was checked by Torquil's expression, sceptical and amused.

"Isn't it rather a case," he parried, "of choosing the line of least resistance? We want to stand well with those we like, and agree to overlook their faults"—the corners of his mouth tilted—"hoping they'll do the same by us!"

"But supposing a fault goes so far as to give offence—causes pain?"

"A personal offence?" asked Torquil.

"Yes. Isn't that the test of friendship? To be able to forgive."

"No." He spoke almost roughly. "If it's intentional, it's treachery—not real friendship. And forgiveness in itself is weak. A compromise that conceals a grudge."

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"That's rather the line your hero takes." Josephine looked thoughtful. "What I meant when I said your book was bitter."

"Which brings us round to my first point. It's partly true."

"Is it?" She wondered. "But you can't have perfection in this world. You must take people as you find them."

"Or not at all," said Torquil grimly.

"Which means standing quite alone—as the man in your book did. Yet he complained of his loneliness. Isn't that a paradox?"

"An author can only write what he feels." Torquil's voice was arrogant.

Josephine made no response. The conversation had slipped away again from conventional bounds, but she resented the tone he employed. With Heron the talk always drifted to abstract matters and conjecture. But Heron was an old friend. Besides this, he had better manners.

"Clever, but not a gentleman," she summed up the man beside her. She used the term in a broad sense.

"What are you making?" said Torquil abruptly.

"Bags to hold lavender. I tie them up with gay ribbon and sell them to my London friends. The money goes to St. Dunstan's, for the Blind, from Sister Ann. We have any amount of lavender and it seems a pity to waste it."

"From Sister Ann? Why not from yourself?" He was studying her through narrowed eyes.

Josephine hesitated. Did he take the evasion for a pose? To her relief a far-off note boomed across the sunny garden, giving her the excuse she needed.

"There's the gong!" She rose to her feet. "I'm sure you're ready for your lunch. What was the weather like in London?" she asked as she went down the steps and smiled as she said it, thinking of Heron. She could see him, a twinkle in his eyes, listening to her polite attempts to be pleasant to her difficult guest.

"Full of glare and gritty winds. I had to close my window to write."

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"Were you working this morning?" She looked surprised.

"From seven o'clock until I started. I'm two-thirds through another novel."

"So soon on the heels of the first?" She approved his energy.

"I had a fortnight's holiday. I can't afford to waste time."

She wondered if the remark referred to ambition or a lack of means? She was conscious of a sense of pity. Was it poverty that had left its mark so plainly on his face? After all, his aggressive manner might be due to intense shyness.

"You love writing?" she suggested.

He gave her a quick look as though he dreaded mockery. Meeting her sympathetic eyes, clear and candid, his brow lightened.

"Well, it's *me*," he explained boyishly, with a cheerful absence of grammar. .

"As natural as breathing." She smiled back.

"Not always." He shortened his stride, in order to keep pace with her, and stole a sidelong glance at her face before he dared the conclusion, "*You* don't believe that one turns on a tap and lets the words pour forth?"

"No." She entered into his mood. "I'm not even going to ask you where you get your ideas from? And if you think out your plot or let it sprout at its own sweet will."

"Thanks." He laughed, for the first time, with a hearty ring that surprised her. "I'll tell you what's more annoying. To meet people who look on writing as a hobby involving waste of time, and prate about an *'active* life' as the only test of manhood. They find peculiar virtue in movement. To sit still and think is sheer laziness. Unless of course it takes place in some palatial office, after an expensive lunch. That man's *earned* the right to think, and even to put his thoughts on paper! In fact, he's expected to write his life. If he's wise he includes the statement that he played football in his youth, or ran errands for his boss."

"Barefooted." Josephine smiled. Torquil in this mood

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amused her. All the time he talked she could see his quick eyes taking in the features of the old house, its fine but solid proportions and a certain conscious dignity that ignored the passing fashions. She led the way through the garden door into a little vestibule where the overflow of Merriman's prints lined the walls from wainscot to ceiling, and paused at the foot of the staircase.

"Your room's the last door on the right at the end of the big passage. Can you find your way without me? You needn't hurry, as the gong always allows us five minutes when we're out in the garden. There's hot water laid on. Ring if you want anything."

"Thanks."

She watched him mount the stairs swiftly, without effort. At the turning she caught a glimpse of his face, eager and interested as that of a child bent on "exploring."

"He's very young," she thought, with a faint regret for her vanished girlhood. "Young enough to have set opinions that Time will modify or change. I daresay the war has roughened him. At any rate, he fought for us—one of our voluntary army."

She never forgot this standing debt to the men who had formed a living bulwark of agonized, enduring flesh for days, and months, and years on end, before the tide of victory turned. To them was the lasting glory of resistance in the teeth of despair. Of desperate retreats and all the horror of unknown, unmet devices, poison gas and war from the skies, constant lack of ammunition and trenches waist-deep in mud. Peace could not wipe out the memory of those early days from her mind. She was not one of those to indulge in sentiment for the dead and overlook the needs of the living. What were manners, she asked herself, compared with such a test of manhood? Torquil had not held back until the goad of conscription had driven men to take up the burden. She must keep that thought before her as an antidote when he spoke roughly.

Meanwhile the object of her reflections had reached his well-appointed room and surveyed it approvingly, noting

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the bowl of sweet peas on a writing table in the window. He guessed who had placed them there. Amazing that Merriman should have this delicate creature for a wife!

As he came out, he met a maid who stood back for him to pass. He felt her dark eyes upon him and wondered if she were Élise. He stiffened and strode on, his slight swagger accentuated by a touch of self-consciousness. The maid's thin lips curled as she watched the tall figure swing down the red-carpeted corridor, with its bay, formed by a deep window at the head of the staircase, holding a fine old linen-press and a pair of graceful, high-backed chairs. He was looking at these when Josephine appeared in her own doorway. He thought it an odd place to put them. But the house was crowded with furniture, Merriman's chief hobby.

As they went down, the publisher's wife explained that he had gone to a sale at the other side of the county in the big car that morning.

"I'm hoping he won't be tempted. We've no room for anything more, but he can't resist a real bargain—though, luckily, they're rare now. If he brings home another wardrobe, it will be the last straw!"

Torquil, aware of his ignorance of the subject involved, adroitly changed it to a dissertation upon pictures. He had a better knowledge of these and at lunch he admired those on the wall, of a certain Dutch school, massed flowers, tulips and roses, on a dull black background. He was hungry and the food was good. The wine too. It unloosed his tongue. He talked himself into one of his moods of vivid enthusiasm over the London galleries.

For the first time, Josephine was aware of his charm; the driving force of his brain, his facile and eloquent description, the light that played on his lean face and the strong vitality of his gestures. How alive he was, and confident! If his books, as he said, were part of him, he should go far. Yet, all the time she was conscious of something lacking, some quality. Was it "reverence"? No, that wasn't the right expression. She probed the mystery in vain. A hardness, perhaps, caught in the trenches.

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He sank suddenly into silence over his coffee-cup.

"I've bored you." Here was the other Torquil, aggressively shy, yet endearing.

"You haven't at all. I love pictures and I always like to discuss them."

His brown eyes lit up with a swift, boyish mischief.

"I didn't give you much chance! The fact is, Mrs. Merriman, I hardly ever go out. I'm afraid I've no social virtues. I don't *like* society, and besides, I've no time for it. You'll have to make excuses for me."

He could not have found a swifter road to Josephine's heart. She leaned towards him, across the polished mahogany—with its dainty Venetian mats, fine old glass and silver—which had considerably worried Torquil at the start: a question of crumbs and slippery forks.

"I'll tell you a great secret." A dimple played in her cheek. "I hate Society myself, though I like a few real friends round me. That's why I run away from my duty in London and hide here. We're both of us rank offenders!"

"Hurrah! Then I've *not* bored you?" His high spirits led him on.

"Ah, now you're fishing for compliments!" She rose, laughing, from the table and moved to a door beyond. "This is the library." She passed through, Torquil behind her. "I'm going to prove my argument by abandoning you to your own devices for an hour whilst I write letters. Later on, we're going to tea with David Heron in his cottage. I expect you've read his work? He's another hermit—and a *dear*." Her voice fell on the word and Torquil felt curiously moved. To be called a "dear" by a woman like this would be an achievement.

"Please don't consider me," he blurted out, caught by her charm, "I mean, I'd be happy anywhere, by myself—— That is——" He stopped dead, biting his lip.

Josephine laughed and Torquil joined in, after a second's hesitation.

"I understand." She nodded gaily. "You needn't explain. In that box you'll find cigarettes." She touched

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the table as she passed it, "And there's plenty of literature. So, au revoir!" With this, she left him, erect, in the middle of the room, too absorbed in his new conception of her to remember to open the door.

He heard the faint click of the catch as it closed and came to his senses. The lined walls hemmed him in. His eyes roamed over them. They held the accumulated thought of men long dead but vividly present in the spirit of the written word. Here was victory over the grave. The straggling rows of well-bound classics roused in Torquil a sense of battle. As ever, his imagination came round, full circle, to himself. Some day his name should figure on that roll-call of success. Some day, too—his thoughts narrowed—he would own a library like this, with its graceful, period furniture, its Persian runners and fine old mirror. An eagle topped the great gold frame, chains suspended from its beak, between the long, moulded pillars. The glass held the lustrous note of which makers have lost the art or abandoned it in the modern craving for brilliancy and a faultless reflection. He caught sight of his own figure and experienced a sudden mistrust that sent his fingers to his tie. He was not in harmony with the room. He felt shabby and obscure. Restless, too. He turned away as though the ancient mirror mocked him, walked across to the further wall, holding a modern section, and took down a slim volume of verses by Stevenson; a posthumous publication, of which he had seen a review.

Opening the book at random, he read the poem that headed the page.

"As Love and Hope together
Walk by me for a while
Link-armed the ways they travel
For many a pleasant mile—
Link-armed and dumb they travel,
They sing not but they smile."

Josephine's face rose up before him, the lips in a gentle curve. She had smiled when she called Heron "a dear." Torquil's eyes grew wistful. Hope was a vague proposition,

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a weakly copy of that desire which spurred a man to pursuit of Fame. Love? He had nothing to do with love. It was one of the renunciations which the tyrant, Work, imposed on him. He read on, with a faint disdain:

"Hope leaving, Love commences
To practise on his lute,
And as he sings and travels
With lingering, laggard foot,
Despair plays obligato
The sentimental flute."

Absurdly, the memory of the cornet player came to him. Torquil's world could hold despair. The crushed rebellion of the poor, and that deeper misery artists know: the straining up to an ideal above their reach, ever receding as Time sets a limit to human endeavour. His mouth took on a bitter curve. Had Stevenson a remedy?

"Until in singing garments
Comes royally, at call—
Comes limber-hipped Indiff'rence
Free-stepping, straight and tall—
Comes singing and lamenting
The sweetest pipe of all."

Torquil drew a deep breath. The book still open in his hand, he walked across to the window, instinctively drawn by the sense of space. Over the smooth, well-kept lawn he could see the ghost of Stevenson's dream pass on feet that spurned the daisies, virile and young—with Torquil's face. In the stillness of the noon hour when even the birds' song was hushed and the leaves hung slack and saturated with the strong rays of the sun, he could catch the strain of that elfish pipe—a magic beyond that of Pan's.

"Limber-hipped Indifference." Armour for his tortured soul, a garment covering his rags. . . .

Away to the West, where the purple hills were veiled in glimmering haze, lay the golden land of promise, a kingdom for the adventurer—that deathless Kingdom of Romance. He had only to gird his loins anew and take up the pilgrim's

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staff, "free-stepping, straight and tall." Success waited on the sky-line.

His envy of the publisher's house slipped away and was replaced by a growing contempt for the owner who lived on the work of cleverer brains. To-morrow he would assert himself. He guessed that some motive of business lay under the present invitation. He would pit his strength against Merriman's. He started. Some one had entered the room. Turning, he saw the dark face of the Brittany maid. She advanced slowly and laid a pile of current reviews on a table that stood between them.

"Mrs. Merriman sent you zese, sir."

He thanked her with the stiff manner he adopted towards her class. He was secretly mistrustful of servants—rightly so, for no one is quicker to detect a flaw in a man's birth—and here, too, he had been forewarned.

Her glance wandered over him and was withdrawn with a certain primness that held a hint of suspicion. She went out silently.

Torquil stood for a moment longer, drinking in the wide view. The spire of the church bisected the foreground, silver above the dark firs. He resented its presence on the scene; a note of divine authority struck on the shield of man's labour, absorbing praise due elsewhere. If there were a God, He lived in man, through man's endeavour, his endless struggle upward to his own ideal. Torquil would go no further than this. He smiled as the fancy entered his mind that God was man's publisher, keen on the market of his soul.

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CHAPTER IV

"WELL, what do you think of him?" Josephine lowered her voice.

She was lingering at Heron's gate. Merriman had returned in time to join in the little tea-party and was now strolling on ahead by the side of his new author.

"A good-looking boy. Seems clever," Heron responded promptly. A twinkle came into his blue eyes. "I rather like a visitor who saves one all trouble in conversation. He would make a good lecturer."

Josephine dimpled.

"That's malicious. Poor Torquil! His idea of small-talk is either to sit in a critical silence or assume the monopoly. It was partly your fault—you encouraged him."

"Agreed. As you know, I'm lazy, and I haven't his flow of language. Richard was present too, and Torquil was on his mettle—enough to make a man nervous, and it sometimes takes this form." He added abruptly, "Where does he come from?"

"No one knows. He's a mystery. He doesn't seem to have any friends—is utterly absorbed in work. I feel rather sorry for him. He's shy, too, though you mayn't believe it."

Heron smiled.

"That's so like you! I could see when you arrived that you'd made up your mind to pity him. But I rather misdoubt your judgment. He has great confidence in himself."

"You don't like him?"

"I can't say. I've not seen enough of the man. I should think he'd appeal to women more than to my own sex." He broke off and shrugged his shoulders. "He's all right—offensively young to an old stager like myself. You can put it down to jealousy! I want to be the only friend."

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"Oh, I couldn't make a *friend* of him." Josephine spoke quickly. "He's not——" There followed a short silence. Heron helped her out.

"Do you remember the remark made by Elizabeth Bennett's father when he summed up Mr. Collin's style? 'There is a mixture of servility and self-importance in his letter that promises well.'" A chuckle escaped him. "Servility is too strong a word. It's more a false humility, though he doesn't like his opinions challenged." He opened the gate. "I'll see you home."

As they passed out, Josephine turned and looked up at the old house.

"Isn't it perfect in this light?"

Heron nodded, inwardly pleased, his rugged face serene and thoughtful.

The original dwelling stood back, with its sloping roof and timbered front, between the wings of the barn and the dairy quarters, added later. A flagged path led up to the porch, massed in flowering clematis, and was broken midway by a sun-dial, where the paving stones, touched by moss, were bordered by a narrow bed with great tufts of sweet william, massed violas and stocks. Two dwarf lilacs guarded the entrance, miniature trees that in the spring were weighed down with double blossom, and the smooth turf crept up to the walls where the creepers were rigorously cut to preserve the charm of the higher beams. Against the wall that faced the barn a long green bench, with the upright and uncompromising back of centuries past, broke the line. It was one of Heron's chief treasures; a genuine relic from the inn, suggesting gaffers with churchwarden pipes brooding between spurts of gossip.

A clipped yew hedge lined the palings, and was broken by a latched gate. On the other side of the lane were meadows with high trees and a sentinel in the shape of an enormous holly bush, trimmed into a massive cone, that watched the house with dark attention. The sun was setting, and a glow of pink warmed the white-washed plaster and flamed red in the diamond panes under the quaint

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crooked eaves. The old inn had the sly air of winking at the passers-by, aware of its reformation but glorying in its unhallowed past.

On the mat a rough-haired terrier wistfully studied his master's movements, divided between his lawful duty as guard and the chance of an evening walk.

"Rough!" The dog rose with a bound, his shaggy coat a-quiver, his body curving in gratitude. Heron felt in his pocket and produced a leash and tethered him. "He'll be after the bunnies otherwise, and lead me no end of a dance. *Look* at him!"

Rough was straining against his collar, fore-feet off the ground, throttling audibly.

They moved on up the lane, like a blind couple led by the dog.

"I wonder what takes the place of bunnies in a man's life," mused Heron. "Ambition or women, I suppose? A woman will be Torquil's downfall."

"Whatever makes you say that?" Josephine glanced sideways, startled.

"I don't know. It came to me, suddenly, for no reason. Except that a man so self-centred brings down on himself the wrath of the gods. Short of a thunderbolt, a woman is their favourite weapon for reducing overweening pride."

"But Torquil is superior to love. He practically told me so." Josephine looked mischievous.

"No man is superior to love." Heron stared straight ahead. "He might as well assert control over the elements —chain the winds and the sunshine." He changed the subject abruptly. "Wouldn't that delight a painter?"

They had come to an open stretch on the outskirts of the wood, where the tall trees had been cut down, leaving stumps, already a prey to the brambles that crept up to cover the shining wounds. It was like a field of blood, patched with flowering epilobium in massed ranks of glorious colour. A rabbit scampered across to its burrow, and from Rough came a hoarse squeal of baffled desire.

"Poor old chap!" His master sympathized.

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"You're simply longing to let him loose." Josephine smiled at the pair.

Heron nodded, but tightened his hold on the leash.

"The hunting instinct that never dies. I once saw an old farmer, paralysed and propped in his chair at a window, watching the hounds go by. I've never forgotten his expression. His eyes were the eyes of a boy—and he couldn't move, hand or foot!"

"Dreadful." Josephine shuddered.

"No. He was happy for a moment, living over the old days. Memory is a foretaste of eternity, unruled by time—a man's heaven or hell on earth. When I'm at the last lap, I shall see you in your lavender frock against that flaming mass of flowers. I stored it up preciously."

A little silence fell between them, warmed by all they held in common, the friendship of the long years and their simple reverence for beauty. At the farther stile the pair ahead had paused. Merriman leaned against it, watching Torquil, his head bent over a narrow slip of paper. He was reading, his face moody. Heron smiled to himself.

"Observe Richard's attitude. I wouldn't mind betting that he's given our friend a harsh review of his book to digest. At the psychological moment, too! Yes, it's a press-cutting." Torquil had handed it back with a studied air of indifference. "That hurts, you know, with one's first book, and Torquil's experience is too raw for him to realize that it's likely to do more good than harm."

"Why?" Josephine was curious.

"It's indifference that kills an author. A long and really bitter review shows that his work has the power to arouse critical interest, instead of the usual weariness. A reviewer's life is not that of honey. Think of the stuff he plods through. Hopelessly amateur attempts and anæmic novels by worn-out authors, clinging to popularity and to that truly British spirit which will shout itself hoarse over an actor who can no longer remember his lines. I attempted the task in the early days, but suffered too acutely. The slaying of fools—worse still, innocents—is not a soothing

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occupation, and I found myself drifting into impulses of kindliness that warred with my literary judgment. Or into bitter diatribe that the work hardly warranted. A 'waste of words'—as Torquil would say."

"But that was about letters. Which he never writes, on principle! I shall be amused to see if he thanks me for his visit."

"He'll probably send you a ninepenny wire," Heron suggested cheerfully. "Or he may consider that his presence has wiped out the trivial debt. You've entertained a great author! You think that's unfair?" He had seen the faint protest on her face. "I don't know why he ruffles me to such an absurd extent. Perhaps it's because he sneers so openly at living writers. That hits my vanity!" He chuckled, pursuing the train of thought. "It's the fashion of the day to think no good of a scribe till he's dead. Torquil swears by the classics, but I have an idea that, had he lived in the Elizabethan period, he would have joined with Ben Jonson and Marlowe in their attack on Shakespeare. He grudges praise—it's a part of his nature. But when he threw a stone at Conrad I could have gat me up and smote him!" His laugh rang out. "There's a phrase! A pity Carrie isn't here. She would have said: 'But that's not grammar!'"

"Shall I introduce Torquil to Carrie? As an aid to his education."

"Do." Heron stooped down and picked up the dog. On the path ahead, his quick eye had detected broken fragments of a bottle. Rough snuggled against his master. A throbbing pink tongue shot out in an endeavour to reach his cheek. "None of that!" said Heron severely.

"We could look in on our way back from a drive tomorrow afternoon. The Brackneys are always at home on Sundays, and Carrie likes a young man."

Heron glanced at her obliquely.

"I think you're right. Yet she won't trouble to make herself presentable!"

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"She relies on the charm of youth," Josephine reminded him. "And on the 'virtue of common sense.' "

"And candour. She always 'says what she means.' Especially if it's likely to wound!" He released the dog to his old pursuit of testing the strength of the leash. "She doesn't look so bad on horseback. I passed her, early this morning, mounted on Mrs. Delaporte's mare. She was so engrossed, she hardly saw me." He hesitated, then resumed, "I wish some one would give her a hint. She's turning that groom's head. I can't bear to think of gossip connected with the Brackneys' name, and you know what a village is? The man's a handsome, impudent rascal. He'll talk—and then there'll be trouble."

"Are you suggesting that I should do it?"

"Well, you're fond of the old people. Upon my word, I wish she'd bolt with her Adonis. They'd be far happier without her. No, you can't interfere. I see that."

"If I get a chance," said Josephine. "But I won't *make* one—it's too obvious."

Merriman, at the stile, hailed them.

"Now, you two, we'll be late for dinner!"

Heron held out his hand.

"I must get back. I've some work to finish."

"Sure that's the reason?" Her eyes danced. She guessed he had had enough of Torquil.

"Sure." His face was rather grave. "Take care of yourself. I may look in at the Brackneys' to-morrow—about tea-time. I've not been near them for ages."

"And I'm to protect you from Carrie?"

"You can offer her a substitute." He grinned and retreated, waving his hand to the pair awaiting her.

Torquil looked rather subdued. Merriman was in high spirits.

"Well, my dear?" He extended an arm and helped her over the low stile. "I suggest that we don't dress to-night. The wind's gone down and after dinner we can sit in the garden. There ought to be a full moon."

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"Would you like that?" Josephine inquired courteously of their guest.

"Very much." His dark eyes were veiled by a touch of melancholy.

She remembered Heron's words: "It hurts, with a first book," and was very gentle for the rest of the short walk. She was conscious, too, of the faint guilt which a hostess feels when she has stooped to criticize a visitor under the shelter of her roof. But Torquil was in a silent mood.

At dinner he curbed his impatient tongue and listened to Merriman's anecdotes of great authors he had known, and of old furniture hunts and bargains. Only once was he carried away into what Heron called a "lecture" and this was partly the publisher's fault. He drew him out deliberately and sat, absorbed, watching him. Torquil defended his opinions with a touch of real eloquence, and the other man nodded his head. Josephine guessed that he was pleased.

When she went to fetch her cloak, Merriman met her and drew her aside.

"He's all I thought him—and more," he told her. "A difficult man to deal with, but brilliant. I should like you to be nice to Torquil. You'd do him good. He lacks manners. But I fancy his heart's all right. When we get back to town we must ask some pleasant people to meet him. He needs social experience. But he'll go far——" He stopped abruptly and touched her cheek with his finger. "What is my little wife's opinion?"

A shadow flitted across her face.

"I'm sorry for him," she said simply.

Merriman gravely acquiesced.

"I fancy he has a hard struggle, though he hides the fact. He's bitterly proud."

The expression seemed to her well-chosen.

"Is it poverty that has soured him?"

"I gather there's something more. He's a rebel against class distinctions—been badly snubbed at some time in his

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life, I should say. But he carries his rancour too far. I've been trying to induce him to modify this in his books. It will estrange many readers, especially those who might be useful. Besides, this intensely personal note breaks the flow of his story. Crawford has hit upon the weakness in a cutting and very able review. I showed it to Torquil this afternoon. I hope I made an impression, but he doesn't take advice kindly. It occurred to me that you could help. Let him carry away from here a pleasant memory. Show him that a good position does not always cover a hard heart. That's his ruling obsession—though he wants to be successful himself!" He smiled. "It's the old story; envy and a sensitive spirit. He sees offence where none is meant. He has no backing except his brains. It's a good incentive to work, but Torquil needs humanizing. If you can win his confidence, you may be the boy's salvation."

"I'll try." The stars in her eyes shone.

"Then you'll succeed," he told her fondly. "It will be a new interest. But don't let him fall in love with you!" He laughed the seriousness out of his voice. "I'm handing him over from this moment. You'll find him in the garden."

"But you're coming too?"

He shook his head.

"I want to run through a manuscript I brought down yesterday. He'll be easier alone with you. Make hay—while the moon shines!"

It was not the first time Merriman had included his wife in his business schemes. He knew her power over men and trusted her unfaltering instinct. A great believer in character, he had never grown stale in his study of life. He had a deep reverence for talent. It sometimes warred with his keen judgment in business matters, for which he was famed. No one could draw up a shrewder agreement, but his charity was not proof against distress where he liked an author, or detected the flame of genius. His marriage to Josephine at an age when a man insensibly hardens, had saved him from the danger of becoming avaricious. She nourished his enthusiasm for the human side of his work.

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Without her, he might have improved his finances, but have lacked a finer happiness.

As she set forth in pursuit of Torquil, Josephine's mind was full of her husband. She saw that his new author had roused Richard's expectations, a little damped by a recent affair that had brought sorrow to them both. In vain, Josephine had tried to save a promising young poet caught in the toils of drink; a struggle lasting two years. Now he rested in his grave, leaving a slender volume of verse, alive with a wistful, despairing vision of that spirit too weak to conquer the flesh. Merriman had supported him for the last ten months of shattered health, a secret that few people guessed. It was one of his hidden charities, a tribute to a spark of genius.

She longed now for a success to hearten her publisher. Torquil might supply it. The faults of his character pointed to strength, not weakness. She must try and make a friend of him. Yet something in her rebelled against the thought. As proud as the man himself, she might pity him but she could not stoop to win him through feminine devices. The difference in their ages was too slight for her to adopt a maternal pose, she decided. She must get at him through his work.

"Are you there?" Her voice stirred the shadows gathered round the old house, and a figure rose from a seat in the shelter of a bay. "Don't get up! I'm coming to join you." She suited the action to the words. "You're sure you don't find it chilly?"

"Rather not. It's heavenly here. Look at the moon slowly rising. I'm longing to see it spiked on the steeple of the church."

"Like a cheese on a skewer," she suggested.

"Or a man's face with a rapier through it. Did it ever happen, I wonder? In the duels one reads about it's always the heart or the sword-arm. But real fighting can't be described."

"You were in the war?"

"For three years." His voice was sombre.

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She risked a shot.

"And you hated it?"

"The idea behind it—the horrible waste. Those millions of mangled bodies in a world that called itself civilized. Not all the splendid heroism could wipe out the sense of insult, the individual revolt against death." His nostrils curled. "I daresay it paid the capitalists."

"It saved our honour," she protested.

"Did it? It was a lucky thing the Germans overran Belgium."

"You mean it gave us an excuse?" Her voice was very still and controlled, but there was anger in her eyes.

"Exactly."

"Then why did you volunteer? You left Cambridge to join the forces long before conscription came."

"That's rather clever of you," said Torquil. He gave a short, hard laugh. "I hated Cambridge. War seemed a great adventure, immense copy, and an easy way to cut adrift."

"I don't believe a word you say!" She still spoke evenly.

"You must believe it. It's the truth."

"A part, but not all. I've read your book."

"That was written afterwards."

"Congratulations. You've improved! Now, I suppose I've made you angry?" She laid a hand on his sleeve, when he did not answer her. "Torquil, listen to me. You're a born writer. You can speak slightingly of things you feel, because your pride prompts you to hide the best in you, but in your work you can't lie. It's a stronger force than the impulse to scorn the opinion of the world."

She felt the arm beneath her fingers grow rigid. His face was averted.

"You believe in me—as an author?" The words escaped him against his will.

"I do." She thought of Merriman and with an effort finished the speech. "I should like some day, too, to believe in you as a man."

"I never look on myself in that light, merely an impulse

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behind the pen. Until——" He stopped on a husky note.

She finished the phrase for him.

"Until success lies at your feet."

Torquil nodded.

"I think it will." She could feel the force of his ambition, like a tangible form that shadowed him. "But the work depends on the man. There's a danger of atrophy if you neglect the human side."

He gave her a quick, sidelong glance, haunted by the words and the grain of truth in them. She gathered all her courage together and whispered:

"Why are you so bitter?"

It seemed to snap the taciturn spell that held him, providing a safety valve for his pent-up emotion.

"You'd never understand. You *couldn't!* Your life holds all that mine has lacked—money, refinement, sympathy." His words poured out tumultuously, with an angry emphasis. "I've had to struggle since childhood—a childhood warped by my father's hate and his chapel-going hypocrisy! Do you wonder I'm not religious—that I don't thank God for your stone wall? I can only see the broken backs of the men who sweated and slaved to build it. To you, your flowers are a miracle. To me, they're the result of money, and a power that has no right to exist. I don't mean in your own case, but in those who for centuries past lived on the work of others, hereditary monopolists. I don't know why I'm telling you this."

"Never mind. Go on. That is, if you can trust me."

"I've never trusted any one. Since——" She could see him bite back the words. He left the sentence incomplete. "I had my eyes opened early. They talk about the power of brains, but it's nothing to that of birth or money—in this country rotted by tradition. I've learnt my lesson. I don't forget it. But brains count—in the end. Until then, I stand alone."

"But is there no one you care for—who cares for you?"

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She glanced at his face. It contracted with a sudden spasm as though she had dealt him a secret blow.

"There's my mother. But she's no good. A slave, too, in my father's power. It was her fault—— No, I can't tell you. It's the root of the trouble. I cut adrift, utterly. She doesn't know where I am."

"Not even that you write? Haven't you sent her your book?"

"No. She wouldn't understand it. She wouldn't be allowed to read it. My father would see to that! It's not chapel literature." His sneer emphasized his meaning.

"She'd be so proud," said Josephine gently.

"It's no good being proud to be bullied and to have your old offence flung in your teeth." His voice hardened. "It's no use, Mrs. Merriman. I can never go back to my people. The gulf between us is too great."

"Then what you need most is a friend." All memory of her husband's advice had slipped from her mind. She was moved solely by a pity that brought the tears to her eyes. "But you have to meet a friend half-way." She held out her hand to him.

Torquil, in silence, looked down at the fragile fingers that persisted and were not withdrawn although they quivered. Suddenly his own shot out and enclosed them.

"You mean that?"

She nodded.

He scrutinized her delicate face and his own grew softer, almost boyish and full of relief.

"Just as I am—on trust?" he suggested.

The mist cleared from her eyes. He saw again the radiation of the pupils and a faint curve of humour in her gentle lips.

"Isn't that part of the charm?" she asked.

"Unexplored country?" He guessed her thought and realized suddenly that her hand still lay in his. Nervously, he released it and watched it fall to her lap. The whole scene seemed unreal. She was part of the moonlight that

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silvered her hair and even the tips of the dark fur fastened beneath her pointed chin. He became aware of his own bulk and of a curious, reluctant desire to protect this transparent creature, so lightly poised by his side. He waited for her next words.

"Tell me about the book you're writing."

"Now?" He was startled by the request. Yet it fitted into the fairy-story.

"If you feel in the mood." She leaned back and drew the folds of her cloak about her.

Beneath it, he saw the glimmer of her lavender skirts and her little feet, crossed sedately. Her attitude gave him confidence. It was that of a ready listener.

The moon sailed up serenely over the rigid weather-cock, unmindful of its danger, until it reached mid-heaven and chased the shadows from the garden. It outlined Torquil's profile with the effect of a woodcut, emphasizing his black hair and dark eyebrows and giving a *mat* pallor to his olive skin. He leaned forward as if to draw his breath more quickly, grudging the break in the flow of words that gathered speed as he lost himself in his inspiration. Impatiently he thrust aside superfluous detail and description, himself the hero, voicing his thoughts. He had forgotten Josephine. She was only a part of the night, of its silence and mystery. In the likeness of the Creator he tested his work and found it good. He had reached the climax of his story when a voice called from the house:

"Josephine!"

"Oh, damn!" cried Torquil.

"Sh!" She laughed and rose to her feet. "Never mind! I'm longing to hear the rest of it, but we've all to-morrow. I shall carry you off in the car, after lunch, for a long drive and satisfy my curiosity. Come! We must go—Richard is waiting."

He stood up obediently, then hesitated with a glance down the path in the direction from which the voice had shattered his dreams. He was frowning.

"Mrs. Merriman? About——"

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"What you told me?" She guessed his fear. "I never betray a confidence. Not even to Richard. It's not my way."

"Your 'way'?" He looked down at her with a wondering admiration. She heard him murmur under his breath, "A path of moonlight." He did not explain, but followed her slowly to the house.

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CHAPTER V

THE heat in church was intolerable. Even the choir-boys wilted, and the school-children ceased to shuffle and sat in a limp somnolence as the rector pursued his endless sermon.

At "Fourthly, my dear brethren," Josephine lost patience and began to devise autumn improvements in the garden.

"If I *look* attentive, it's quite enough," she decided wearily, as the old voice droned on, extolling the "blessedness of peace" to a congregation mostly composed of farmers and their families who had tasted prosperity, for the first time, during the war. She had decided to spare a certain defunct pear tree and use its trunk as a support for a Dorothy Perkins when she caught the welcome words, "And now, to God the Father." With a genuine impulse of praise and thanksgiving, the congregation rose to its feet.

She was one of the first to reach the porch. Outside was burning sunlight that hurt the eyes after the gloom of the narrow, vaulted space. In order to wrestle with her sunshade, she paused in the dusty road, where a knot of village boys had gathered, aimless in their Sunday clothes. It had been soaked in a sudden shower the day before and the stick had swollen. The catch would only move half-way and she was giving it up in despair when a voice fell on her ear:

"Allow me, madam?"

She looked up. It was Oliphant, the Delaportes' groom.

"Oh—thank you. It seems to have stuck." She relinquished the sunshade and watched the man exert force and, at length, succeed.

He handed it back with a sly glance that held a hint of admiration.

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"Needs a bit of sand-paper and then it would go all right." A little too late, he added, "madam."

Josephine resented his manner.

"I'm much obliged." Her voice was stiff. She was moving on when she saw the man's handsome face change. He was looking past her up the lane, his eyes wide and incredulous. Instinctively she followed his gaze. Round the corner had swung a figure, tall, loose-limbed with a faint swagger.

"It's nothing, madam," Oliphant murmured. He touched his cap and stepped back. But his eyes were still riveted on Torquil, approaching them.

Some instinct made Josephine quicken her steps to meet her guest.

"Timed it well, didn't I?" He greeted her boyishly. A light cloak hung over his arm and he pointed to it as he turned and fell into step beside her. "It's raining hard over the hills and Mr. Merriman was afraid that you'd get caught in it."

"How thoughtful of you," said Josephine.

"Not at all." Torquil laughed. "If you'll give me your prayer-book to carry, people will think I've been to church!"

"No." She smiled up at him. "It would detract from my own virtue. I've done duty for you both. And the church was just like an oven! Let's go home through the fields. I'm longing for a breath of air."

They crossed the road to a gate that opened into a green meadow, spangled with buttercups, in which a pair of cows grazed. As Torquil closed it after her, Josephine turned her head. Oliphant had followed them and was loitering on the opposite path. She glanced at Torquil, but he seemed unaware of the groom's presence. She remembered that both the men had been at the Front. Here, no doubt, was the explanation: some recognition due to service. Yet there had been a spark of malevolence in the watcher's face. Josephine cordially disliked him; all the more when she thought of Carrie. How could the girl stoop to chatter to

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this bold-eyed, familiar rascal? She did not deny him his good looks but, somehow, this made matters worse.

Torquil stooped to gather a flower, and held it out for her inspection.

"What is it? I'm no botanist."

"Cuckoo-pint. So dainty!"

"Yes. It's rather like the frock you were wearing yesterday. Not quite lavender enough. I love colour, don't you?" As she agreed, he continued, "The name's not very appropriate. Such a modest, delicate flower. And one always associates a cuckoo with a brazen attempt to cheat its fellows."

"It's a very maligned bird," she protested, "misunderstood from first to last. Its life is a tragedy."

He looked amused.

"Do explain?"

"It's the fault of the hairy caterpillar—the serpent in its Garden of Eden!" She gave him a sunny glance. "The cuckoo is the only bird that can digest such a tough proposition, and to aid in this process he is endowed with an iron-plated 'Little Mary' of vast proportions. That is his 'cross'—to quote our excellent rector this morning. I don't mean he referred to cuckoos. Nothing half so refreshing!"

Torquil laughed.

"I don't quite follow. Why should the cuckoo neglect its offspring for the sake of a hairy caterpillar? Apart, of course, from the question of greed."

"Because of the mother-bird's proportions. She's too heavy to sit on her eggs; they would have to be iron-plated, too."

"Is that a fact? I believe you're inventing the whole story!" He caught himself watching eagerly for the twinkling stars in her eyes.

"No, it's the truth, and there's worse to follow! She flies in distress from hedge to hedge and sometimes she can't find a nest for her prospective family at the crucial moment. That's the reason for so many broken eggs on the ground. No wonder she turns out the others in a frenzy

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of mother-love. It's a strange caprice of Nature. Why make the hairy caterpillar? It's a perfect pest in the garden. If it were not for the cuckoo we should be overrun with it. I don't know what butterfly it produces—or moth? Perhaps that's the solution."

"Beauty at the expense of love? A butterfly love. It sounds likely. It's often found in the human species." His mood had changed; he was scornful.

A Red Admiral sailed towards them and Josephine pointed to it.

"A glorified hairy caterpillar? Look at the beautiful spots on its wings. After all, Nature's an artist; she can't always be practical."

"You'd find excuses for every one." He studied her with a whimsical smile.

"I?" She looked up, surprised. "Oh, no. There are things I can't forgive."

"What things?" He was curious.

"Any sort of treachery. And meanness, and ingratitude. I can't stand that—it's a form of cheating. To take all and give nothing. Unless it's mere thoughtlessness."

"Always a saving clause!" he observed. "I notice you leave out serious crime—murder and so forth."

"But in nine cases out of ten those are connected with lunacy. There's no question of forgiveness where a mind is unhinged. Besides, luckily, they're rare. It's the constant minor offences that sting, and take happiness from life—such as a friend's disloyalty or cruel words that can't be forgotten. You know that?"

He nodded his head.

"It's best to be iron-plated, like the cuckoo. Immune from outside shafts."

"You can't be. The human heart is made of a different material—mercifully! For it swings both ways—to the heights of joy as well as the depths of despair."

"In unequal proportions." His lip curled.

Their eyes met and Josephine smiled.

"What a goose you are, Torquil!"

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For a moment he looked offended. Then he laughed.

"You *wait!*"

She guessed his meaning and nodded gaily.

"Oh, of course, when you're a great man, I shan't dare to lecture you!"

"I hope you will."

It sounded sincere, but she noticed he accepted this view of his future as definitely settled. She yielded to a passing impulse of feminine curiosity.

"Supposing you don't succeed?" she suggested.

He scowled at her, taken aback.

"I shall." His voice was so rough it repelled her, but she faced him courageously.

"Success does not always bring happiness."

"I'm not out for that," he retorted, with a scornful shrug of his shoulders.

In silence they rounded the clump of firs and entered the home meadow. A drop of rain fell on her cheek, succeeded by others. She turned to her guest, with a glance at his moody countenance.

"I should like my cloak now, please."

He held it out without a word and she wrapped it round her summer dress. Something in the graceful movement, delicate as all her actions, stirred him. He gave her a sidelong glance, apprehensive and penitent. Josephine walked on.

"Was I rude?" Torquil asked abruptly.

"I'm sure you didn't mean to be." Her grey eyes studied him. "Perhaps I was too curious."

"No." He bit out the word.

"Anyhow, we're both being punished!" She dismissed the subject lightly with this allusion to the rain which was meeting them in stinging shafts. "I hope it will clear up for our drive. I want to hear the end of the book."

"You *are* kind." His voice was muffled.

"Nonsense! Give me your arm and we'll run."

Thus, together, they reached the house. In the doorway, Merriman awaited them anxiously.

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"Are you wet, my dear?"

"No." She smiled, breathless. "This kind man brought my coat. And forgot his own!" She passed a hand down Torquil's sleeve. "You must take this off and give it a shake. Or shall I send it to be dried?"

As Torquil laughingly refused, Merriman smiled to himself, watching the pair with approval.

"Unused to damp, after the trenches, eh, Torquil?" he suggested. Still mischievous, he asked his wife, "Was the rector in good form?"

"Painfully so." Josephine sighed. "But Carrie had a new hat with the ticket underneath the brim. Life's full of compensations. She eyed our pew expectantly. I shall take Torquil there after our drive—if the weather clears."

"A very charming young woman," the publisher explained to his guest as they all moved towards the hall. "I hope you're not susceptible? You will have to steel your heart."

"It's iron-plated," Torquil replied with a swift glance at Josephine.

She paused, one foot on the stairs.

"Like a safe—that holds something precious! Isn't that a pretty speech?" Lightly spoken, the words held a full measure of forgiveness for his rough manner in the field. She saw him catch his lower lip for a second between his strong teeth, a wistful light in his eyes. "Poor boy!" she thought. "I don't believe he's ever had any kindness shown him. Anyhow, he shall find it here."

To Torquil this kindness reached its height later on in the day as he sat beside her in the car, beneath a heaven startlingly blue framed in banks of cumuli, and finished the promised story. Against the shifting scenes of fields, green, or golden with ripening corn, and of wooded hollows, he could see her face, still and absorbed, under the curve of her shady hat, and watch the faint stir of her breath in the slender throat where the soft folds of embroidered lawn fell apart. Hands clasped in her lap, she listened like a happy child.

Her serene silence, broken by the faint throb of the car,

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held something hypnotic that focused his thoughts, linking his work with her gentle presence. Beyond her, all was nebulous. There was only the sense of easy movement that lulled the nerves and beat time to the phrases falling from his lips. At the conclusion he leaned closer, unconsciously laying his hand on her arm, and finished breathlessly: "Well?"

Her eyes came round to his face.

"Fine. I like it far better than your first."

He caught at the word of praise with a quickening of his pulses.

"It's a better book." He spoke proudly. "But not the best that I shall write."

A little silence fell between them. Josephine stirred from her dreams first.

"Where are we?" She looked about her.

Torquil gave a joyous laugh.

"Heaven knows!" He was delighted by this proof of her absorption in the intricacies of his story.

"Why, we're almost back at Westwick. And you've missed our historic view! I took you there purposely."

"I don't care! It's been lovely. And the rain's held off just long enough." He glanced up. Overhead was a dark cloud edged with copper. They were mounting a winding hill. On the sky-line a window of blue peeped forth from the gathering grey, streaked with watery shafts from the sun. The breeze had dropped and the leaves on the trees hung motionless. A sullen depression seemed to lie on the green and golden land. Then suddenly, over the hill came a sharp roll of thunder; the kettle-drums of the coming storm.

Josephine gave a little shudder. She leaned forward directing the chauffeur:

"The Glebe House—and quick, Morris!"

"It's rather early," she told Torquil, with a glance at the clock, "but I hate being out in a thunderstorm."

"*Must* we go there?" he ventured, seeing the end of their *tête-à-tête*.

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"I'm afraid so. I told Mr. Heron we'd meet him at the Brackneys' for tea. But you'll like them—they're a dear old couple—and we needn't stay very long."

They topped the rise, caught a glimpse of the church spire and swerved to the right, through open gates, down a short drive, past a trim tennis-lawn with, beyond it, curved flower-beds and the familiar jarring note of scarlet geraniums, calceolarias, and vivid blue lobelia. Venetian blinds of bright green stared through the open windows between draped muslin curtains held together with coral sashes. From a flagstaff over the laurel hedge drooped a dejected Union Jack, and on either side of the pillared porch stood a little old cannon, with three balls neatly piled on the red gravel, a trophy of battles fought at arm's length.

A depressed-looking servant answered their ring and ushered them through a paved hall, bristling with ancient weapons, into the drawing-room.

"I'll tell Mrs. Brackney," she breathed, and departed.

Torquil, in the doorway, was aware of the dusty, spiced scent that lingers round Indian cloths and boxes made of sandal-wood. Although the big room was sparsely furnished it held an effect of overcrowding, every table, shelf, and bracket filled with trophies gleaned from the East, irrespective of their value but sanctified by memories.

At first he thought they were alone, but, as Josephine advanced, from the sofa in the far corner came the unmistakable sound of a snore. She turned, her face mischievous, a finger to her lips and whispered:

"It's Carrie, taking a Sunday siesta. The 'Sleeping Beauty.' There's Romance!"

On tip-toe they drew nearer.

Miss Brackney was stretched at her ease on the Indian coverlet of rusty red with metal disks, her head sunk in a cushion of black cloth embroidered in gold. Her jaw had dropped, the mouth wide open, and, above it, her eyes were tightly closed, the sandy lashes just visible. A fringe that had suffered from the damp stood out in a line of bristles above her high, freckled forehead. Sleep, that

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rarely beautifies the human countenance after childhood, seemed in Carrie's case to mark the narrow boundary that divides the higher and lower creation. Torquil instinctively thought of a ferret.

Josephine glanced at him, her eyes starry with mischief. "You're not tempted to be the Prince?"

"Heaven forbid!" escaped Torquil.

He had neglected to lower his voice. Carrie stirred, yawned, blinked, and drew herself up in a sitting position. A wave of resentment passed over her face.

"Oh! It's you." Her voice was surly.

Josephine smiled down at her.

"I'm so sorry we disturbed you. I'm afraid we're rather early, but we were frightened by the storm." As though the elements backed her up, there followed an angry peal of thunder.

"Storm?" said Carrie stupidly. Her eyes suddenly fell on Torquil and she struggled to her feet, with a furtive pat at the stubbly fringe.

Josephine introduced him, and added a word about his writing. She was amused to see that Carrie had adopted a string of bone beads that rattled against her collar-bones, over her Sunday frock. Although she disliked Josephine, she did not scruple to copy her! At this juncture, the door opened to admit a shrunken old lady, wearing a cap and a Chudda shawl, who leaned on an ebony walking-stick. She was followed by Colonel Brackney, white-haired, lean and dapper, gallant in his defiance of age, a bloodless hand outstretched to grasp that of Josephine's after she had kissed his wife.

"This is very good of you. Always a pleasure to see you," he said. "And Mr.—I didn't quite catch the name?"

"Torquil." Josephine smiled up into the kind old face.

"Ah, Torquil. Now I wonder if you're any relation to a Major Torquil in the Guides, whom we knew at Jubbulpore? You remember, my dear?" He glanced at his wife.

"Quite well," said the old lady. "He gave us that pair of vases—a parting present—when we left." She pointed

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to the specimens in question, in Benares work on intricately carved wooden stands.

It was a habit of hers to recall friends of the old years by the many objects that lined the walls; each one a ghost of the past. Of the long hot days and the vanished glories of military occupation. Instinctively she drew herself up. Into the wrinkled face crept a shadow of her vanished youth. She straightened the rings on her crippled fingers, stiffened and shapeless from rheumatism.

"They're very pretty," said Josephine gently. "But you have so many treasures. The room's quite a museum."

Torquil meanwhile had disclaimed any relationship to the Colonel's acquaintance. A flash of lightning lit up the gloom and the old man counted:

" . . . ten, eleven. Miles away! But you don't have storms here. You should see the ones in India. Now, Mrs. Merriman, try this chair."

In the general settlement, Carrie annexed Torquil. He sat stiffly on the sofa whilst the girl sprawled in the opposite corner, her long legs thrust out, the knees lifting her thin skirt in two sharp points, her petticoat visible beneath the hem.

"So you're an author," she began. "Most of the Merrimans' friends are. I don't pretend to know your books—I've never any time for reading. Far too much to do."

"In what way?" inquired Torquil.

But Carrie refused to discriminate between her self-imposed labours.

"I'm always at it, from morning to night. In the garden or the house. You see, my people are getting on. That's really why I'm here; they want looking after now though Uncle Tom won't admit it. I was up at six o'clock this morning, picking plums."

"Why?" asked Torquil.

"Why?" Carrie looked annoyed. "For jam, of course, and to see that the gardener didn't take half. Last year I'm sure he did, but I was before him this time."

"That must have pleased you," Torquil murmured.

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Carrie nodded and leaned across him—so close that he recoiled—to touch the electric bell.

"For tea," she explained. "They're always late. Ah, here comes David Heron." For the author had entered the room. "Don't get up. He's sure to take the stool next Mrs. Merriman." It was said with intention and Torquil's dislike to the speaker increased as he saw the superior smile on her face which added point to the remark.

Her prophecy was fulfilled. Heron, after moving round the circle to shake hands, settled himself by Josephine's side.

"Did you have a nice drive before the rain? Where did you go?" he inquired of her.

"Ask Torquil?" She smiled.

Heron divined some private joke and looked across at the young author, who responded promptly:

"To see a very fine view."

"I know! The place where the ducks came from. It's a wonderful stretch of country from the top of that long hill. On a clear day you can see for miles." He turned to talk to Mrs. Brackney.

Torquil was hunting for some fresh topic when Carrie jerked herself on to her feet. From without came a rattle of tea-cups.

"I'd better go." She assumed an air of jaded importance. "The parlourmaid's out, and the housemaid's a fool!" With this, to his relief, she left him.

They could hear her voice through the open door, nagging and persistent:

"What have you brought that cake for? It was only baked yesterday. The old one must be eaten first. Is that butter or margarine? Haven't I *told* you that margarine is good enough——"

The rest was drowned as Heron began to talk at random of a certain play which he had seen on one of his rare visits to town.

"Not half bad, though the third act tailed off—in the usual fashion! I've never tried my hand at a play, but it

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must be difficult to keep up the interest for two solid hours and a half. Anyhow, *The Purple Silence* holds some clever dialogue."

Heavy steps crossed the carpet.

"It's *The Violet Silence*," corrected Carrie, halting in front of him. As Heron did not dispute it, she went on stubbornly, "I know it is. If you like, I'll look it up in the paper?"

"Don't trouble," said Heron politely. "I'm sure you're right. You always are."

But the Colonel, already annoyed with his niece for her remarks in the hall, threw himself into the fray.

"I'll swear it's *purple*." He glared at Carrie.

"All right—I'll get the *Times*. Then, perhaps, you'll be satisfied."

Luckily, at this juncture, the depressed housemaid brought in tea and Carrie's attention was diverted. She proceeded to instruct the former where, and in what fashion to lay it. Conversation was held up by these domestic matters, and the Colonel turned to action. He rose, straightened his thin back and possessed himself of the muffin-dish.

"Now, Mrs. Merriman——" He handed it with a gallant air. "I hope there's some butter on them." He peered at the sad-looking scones. "But these are the days of prohibitions—and Carrie's economical. A scone without butter is as bad as watery soup, to my mind. That reminds me of a story——"

"Oh, do tell me?" Josephine felt sorry for the dear old man, generous at heart, but his impulses foiled by the tyrant he supported.

"It's a chestnut, I'm afraid—so old that it must have died when you were in the cradle." He chuckled. "So, perhaps, I can risk it."

Carrie had gone back to the sofa. Her eyes were solidly fixed on Torquil. Said Heron to himself, "She'll tell him directly his tie is crooked." He knew and dreaded Carrie's stare and her talent for noting the smallest defect in any one save herself. Torquil fidgeted. Mrs. Brackney was ab-

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sorbed in the duty of pouring out tea and the Colonel was getting into his stride over the well-worn anecdote, his face lit up with naïve pleasure, savouring the coming joke, when Carrie interrupted him:

"You're forgetting the most important part. You should have explained first——"

The Colonel boiled over.

"I'm not! I wish you'd leave me alone. You'd better tell the story yourself!"

"My dear!" Mrs. Brackney's hands began to shake among the tea-cups.

"Do go on," begged Josephine.

The Colonel pulled himself together.

"Where was I? Oh, yes. He said——" There came a strained silence. "Confound it! I've forgotten."

"Oh, no." His wife was almost in tears. "*I* remember. I'll give you a hint." In a penetrating whisper she rushed blindly at the point. Every one in the room heard her: "'And *did* the partridge walk through the soup'?"

For a perilous moment the Colonel struggled with his amazed annoyance; then his courtesy rose to the test.

"That's it. Quite right, my dear. Ha ha!" He was caught himself by the humour of the wreck. He laughed until his eyes watered.

The company joined in, relieved by his attitude. All save Carrie, nursing her wrath.

"That's Uncle Tom all over," she grumbled, edging closer to Torquil. "When I try to help him he jumps down my throat. So touchy and irritable. Getting senile, I suppose."

Torquil's lip curled.

"He doesn't strike me like that," he retorted under cover of the renewed conversation. "But then, I'm fond of old people, with all their experience. I'd sooner talk to them any day than be bored by youthful ignorance." And he looked her full in the face.

He saw it change; the loose under-lip drop, the furtive yet bold eyes narrow. He waited, tense, but nothing happened. For Carrie was true to type, both a bully and a

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coward. She would not have stood it from a woman but she gave way to Torquil's sex.

"Oh, I like old people, too—though they're difficult to live with. Won't you have some more tea?"

"Thanks." He stood up, cup in hand, amused yet disgusted by her surrender.

Josephine beckoned to him.

"Come and talk to Mrs. Brackney. She wants to know what you think of Westwick." She guessed he had had enough of Carrie.

Nervously he joined the circle, but between Heron and his hostess he found his path made easy, and his confidence returned. Soon he was talking fluently, describing incidents in the war, whilst the old soldier nodded his head and put leading questions to him.

Carrie sullenly watched the group, her eyes flitting from Torquil to Heron, aware of her isolation and the presence of two men both desirable in their way but insensible to her charms. She hated Mrs. Merriman, with her delicate, mature grace, so plainly in her element; married, yet receiving admiration "due to a girl." Suddenly she rose to her feet and straightened the tight petersham belt. Torquil, arrested by her action, paused, with an upward glance at the tall, bony figure, in the midst of the story of a fellow-soldier's heroism.

Carrie leaped into the breach.

"Time I went to see to the pigs. Good-bye, Mrs. Merriman. I suppose you'll be gone before I return. It's stopped raining now."

"But you'll put on your galoshes, Carrie?" Mrs. Brackney interposed with the constant anxiety of the confirmed invalid. "The ground must be soaking wet."

"I don't know where they've got to, but I'll borrow yours," responded her niece. "They used to hang on the nail by the garden door, but I expect one of the servants has stolen them. They're always taking things! Good-bye, Mr. Heron. If you want eggs, let me know." Torquil, she left to the last. To his amazement he felt her hand,

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roughened by her out-door work, linger in his with a faint pressure. "Good-bye."

Carrie strode out, her bone beads clanking against the tarnished regimental buckle.

The Colonel drew a breath of relief.

"*Now*——" He leaned nearer Torquil.

But the story was doomed. He had picked up the threads and was nearing the exciting climax, aware of his listeners' interest, when the door burst open and Carrie reappeared, waving a worn galosh.

"I found it in the kitchen drawer! Doesn't that *prove* what I say?" Her freckled face was flushed with excitement.

Mrs. Brackney feebly protested.

"Perhaps they took them to clean. My dear, you're letting in such a draught!"

"Nonsense!" Carrie held her ground. "I know they steal things! I've told you before! But because Bennett's been here for years you insist on keeping her. And Cook's as bad! I took the trouble to cut the last asparagus and counted the stalks. She sent up *half!* I suppose they ate them in the kitchen."

"That will *do!*" stormed the Colonel. "You seem to forget we're not alone."

"Oh, don't be hard on Carrie, Tom." Mrs. Brackney, tremulous, tried to pour oil on the troubled waters. "She's only trying to do her duty."

Carrie gave a strident laugh.

"And that's all the thanks I get!" She jerked out and slammed the door.

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CHAPTER VI

HERON leaned on his garden gate, letting his eyes wander at will over the frosty meadow on the other side of the lane, his thumb absently pressing down the tobacco in the bowl of his pipe. After a week of rain, the weather had hardened. The holly-bush was glistening at a thousand points, catching the November sunshine. From the gate-post to the yew hedge an industrious spider had woven a web, and every thread of the delicate pattern was filmed with hoar, a net of silver.

Heron examined it gloomily, applied a match to his filled pipe, frowned over the first puffs and continued to stare into space. He was in an idle, rebellious mood, aware of neglected work, yet lacking power of concentration. It was Josephine's fault, he told himself. For two long months, Westwick Place had been ghostly and deserted, the Merrimans in their town house. In despair, Heron had invented the excuse of a visit to his tailor, to find himself, after a lunch at his club, ringing the bell of the Bloomsbury mansion. It seemed to him the last insult to learn that Josephine was out, had gone—so the maid informed him—to a *matinée* with Torquil. The rain poured down on the dirty streets and Heron spent the afternoon in the chilly and discouraging atmosphere of the British Museum. The mummies and the Elgin marbles learned what he thought of Torquil, and a sombre custodian, with the innate belief of all true Englishmen in his own detective powers, shadowed his footsteps relentlessly, having caught his angry mutter. At half-past five he was back on her doorstep, but Josephine had not returned. He caught the next train to Westwick and tramped home through the muddy lanes, an ill-used, lonely man. The letter he had from her next day seemed

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a poor consolation. Why couldn't she return to the country, if only for a week-end? What was keeping her in London? His thoughts came round full circle to Torquil.

"Conceited young ass!" He breathed it aloud and the gate creaked under his weight.

In vain the sun melted the frost on the bare hedge, turning the drops into shining opals, under a sky of tender blue. Beauty was lost on Heron; he set his face to the north wind. Rough, aware of his master's temper, had retired dolefully to the mat. There would be no walk this morning. He lay there, enjoying the sunshine, black nose thrust out on his paws, eyes fixed on the moody back curved above the latched gate.

Suddenly he cocked his ears and gave a low, warning growl. Steps were coming up the lane. Heron grudgingly turned his head, and his heart began to thud. A trim figure was picking its way between the half-frozen puddles. It was Élise, the Brittany maid. Then Josephine must be at Westwick!

Before Rough had realized that the intruder was a friend, Heron was striding up the lane, aware that the November day was a miracle of grace, of silver and gold and blessed sunshine.

Élise returned his greeting with a faint coquetry. Under her prim exterior she hid a Gallic love of romance. Long since, she had probed his secret and approved his adoration with, at moments, a feeling akin to scorn at the blindness of her dear mistress and the author's rectitude. Merriman was an old man when compared to Josephine. It was natural that she should have an admirer nearer to her own years, to add to the gaiety of life. But the affair hung fire; lacked excitement, and Élise wondered. All the elements to hand but the spark that should quicken them strangely missing.

She watched Heron read the letter, which she had brought from Josephine, delighted to see his fingers tremble as he turned the single page.

"Monsieur must not trouble to write. Just a message, Madame said."

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Heron looked up, his face radiant.

"Tell her that I'll be round at half-past two, with pleasure, and take her out in the car. She must wrap up—the wind's cold. How long are you staying?"

"Only three days, monsieur. To arrange household matters and get out summer clothes. We go abroad next week—to ze South of France—Madame and I."

"Never!" He looked astonished. "It's the first I've heard of it."

She caught the faint grudge in his voice and hastened to explain.

"It was of ze most sudden, monsieur. Arranged in—dans un clin d'œil!"

"And where are you going? Monte Carlo?"

"Oh, no, sir. A quiet place, not far from Marseilles. It is ze villa at Les Lecques zat belongs to Mrs. Merriman's brother. It was all ready to receive zem, when they 'ave a cable from ze son in West Africa to say that he is starting 'ome on leave. Now, of course, Mrs. William wishes to remain in London, but unluckily she 'as let her 'ouse. So Madame 'as arranged that they should all come to ours and keep Mr. Merriman company while we go to Les Lecques. Madame 'as not been out of England since ze beginning of ze war. It will be a change for 'er. Away from ze fogs an' ze damp."

"It will." He tried to be unselfish. "And I don't suppose *you* object?"

The dark face lit up. For a moment the woman looked handsome.

"You can figure to yourself, monsieur, 'ow 'appy I am. To see my dear country again, after its so great trials. And I go to Brittany for a week's 'oliday. Madame 'as arranged zis when Mr. Merriman comes to Les Lecques, and we shall all meet in Paris on our return journey. Madame thinks of every one! Even of my old mother—who is alone now."

Heron's eyes risked a question.

"Oui, monsieur. Two sons, quite early in ze war, and since zen my father 'as died. C'est triste, mais que voulez-

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vous? She is only one of many. My married cousin looks after her. It is better for me to earn good money and 'elp her from zis side." She glanced at the watch on her wrist and started. "Is zere anysing more monsieur desires me to say?"

"I don't think so." He held out his hand.

She laid her neatly-gloved one in it, pleased but outwardly sedate.

"Merci, monsieur, et au revoir." The firm pressure of his fingers lingered in her memory as she turned up the lane, and she thought, "Un homme solide! If only my mistress would realize 'er good fortune."

Heron smiled as he watched her choose the smoothest path, with a care for her tight kid boots, that shone under the edge of her well-cut skirt. He was conscious of the sense of finish about the quietly-dressed figure that gave it a spurious grace. What a wonderful race it was! With its sense of beauty and effect linked to inherent thrift, practical, yet romantic, ever ardent to make the most of its opportunities. He thought suddenly of Carrie, slipshod and discontented, secretly thirsting for admiration, yet too lazy to improve her appearance by simple care. Carrie with shoes down at heel beneath an embroidered petticoat!

"I'd far sooner marry Élise." Heron chuckled at the idea and the complications involved. The train of thought carried him on to Josephine at Les Lecques. If only he could be with her there! He saw himself in a vivid picture of sapphire sky and sea, with the south wind sighing through the palms and scattering the mimosa's gold. To be with Josephine alone in that land of sunshine and romance, watching the lizards creep out of the walls beneath the silvery green of the aloes, in the shimmering glare when the drowsy earth pants for the night dews and the moonlit silence, breathing of love.

He awoke with a start from his dream. A flash of white had caught his attention. It flickered out of the hedge, crossed the lane and disappeared.

"Rough!" Heron's voice cracked. *"Rough!"* he

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shouted. "Come back, you villain!" He swung himself over the barred gate into the field and started to run, across the long, wet grass, to try and intercept the dog who was heading for the nearest wood, hot-foot after a rabbit.

At the second hedge they were level. Rough, panting, tried in vain to struggle free from his master's grasp, then changed his tactics, penitent and anxious to escape a thrashing.

"I ought to," Heron grumbled, shaking the dog by the scruff of his neck. "But, dash it all! I can't, to-day." He gathered the terrier up in his arms, regardless of his soaking coat. Rough, relieved, snuggled against him. Heron's cheek went down on the black, velvety ear. "You old fool," he said gruffly.

Turning homeward, he measured the distance across the meadow from fence to fence. He could still do a sprint with any man. Josephine was young, too. Life was not over for them yet. He dared not carry the thought further. It involved Merriman.

"If I put you down," he said to the dog, "will you be good?"

Rough quivered. Something bobbed up near the hedge and a white stump caught the light and vanished down an adjacent burrow. A low wail came from Rough, and Heron decided to run no risks. He strode on with his burden.

The bright latticed eyes of the house twinkled at him under the eaves, dodging the massive holly. Inquisitive and malicious, like the eyes of an old roué, they measured his youth and his chance of adventure.

"A moonlit night and a runaway coach," they whispered. "The woman you love beside you. That was the style in *our* day. But you young men are degenerate. You won't *pay* for your pleasures—you haven't the courage of a lover!"

"You never knew love," scoffed Heron. "You bartered her honour for your desire. You can keep your senile fancies. I belong to a different generation." He closed the latched gate behind him and dropped Rough on the path. In brushing the hairs off his sleeve he saw that it

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was threadbare and remembered his new suit. "I'll go and change," he decided. "I can't let her see me like this." He smiled. "I've got to cut out Torquil! Taking her to a *matinée*? I'll bet she paid for the tickets. He'd accept all and give nothing, if I'm any judge of a man."

He inquired after his fellow-author that afternoon as he steered the runabout carefully through the leaf-strewn lanes. Foreseeing occasions like this, with the chauffeur left in town, he had wisely learnt to drive it.

"Torquil?" Josephine smiled over the edge of her fur collar, amused at Heron's solicitude. "He's down with influenza, poor boy! We've seen a good deal of him in the last few months. He's improved, I think. Richard is wrapped up in him. His new novel has just come in and the readers speak highly of it. I hope it will have a success—not only for Torquil's sake. It's rather an anxious speculation, launching a new author when publishing is so costly."

"But his first book sold well, didn't it?" Heron suggested.

"Quite—for an unknown writer. But it was over-advertised and Richard is out of pocket by it. He hopes to make it up on this one. Of course all this is between ourselves. Richard is enthusiastic, trying to push Torquil in every way; asking critics to meet him and other useful people."

Heron looked wicked.

"'Mrs. Merriman At Home. A lecture will be given by Torquil.' You didn't send me a card?"

"I only invite *kindly* critics."

"Snubbed!" Heron made a grimace. "Is your protégé a social success? I ask it in all humility, being a failure in that line myself." He saw Josephine hesitate and pretended to be absorbed in the wheel.

"Women seem to take to him. Of course he lacks *savoir faire*, and men are quicker to notice this."

Heron left this statement unchallenged.

"He's a good-looking boy—with a cold manner. Your sex immediately concludes that there is fire under the ice. It's stimulating to some women. Especially when an au-

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thor hides his identity under a pseudonym. He's wise in this. Next to success, nothing succeeds like mystery." He gave her a shrewd glance. "You think I'm unfair to Torquil? I confess I don't like the man. He's a climber, and a ruthless one—he'll use you and pass on—and I can't bear to see you squander your kindness and generous pity. There—now I've eased my mind. Don't let's talk any more of him. I want you to myself to-day, since I'm going to lose you for so long."

She nodded.

"It seems strange to be going abroad again. Couldn't you take a holiday and come south for a little?"

"I've been *willing* you to say that! I might, in the New Year."

"Then write later, suggesting a date. *Do!* You would love Les Lecques. I broke my journey there, coming back from Mentone with Richard, the Easter before the war."

They had arrived at the cross roads and she watched Heron turn the car to the left, past some lodge gates through which could be seen a winding drive. A little later they caught a glimpse of the low straggling house through a gap in the wooded grounds.

"Are the Delaportes back?" she asked.

"No. I hear they're off to Egypt. He's still in bad health—has never got over Fraser's death. Hard lines, the only son. I had a letter from her last week about the Cottage Hospital. She confessed she was home-sick, 'fed up with hotels,' but she daren't bring Delaporte back in the winter. A plucky letter. She worshipped that boy."

"Poor Norah!" Josephine sighed. She was silent for a time. Was it better to bear children and lose them, or to remain with a sense of frustrated hope? The war had brought the question home to many a thoughtful woman.

"Well?" Heron was watching her face, trying to follow her secret thoughts.

"Nothing!" She gave herself a shake. "Where are you taking me to-day?"

"To tea at the *Red Dragon*, at Tarne—if you approve?"

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"Lovely! It's so nice to be back again in the country. To-morrow I've heaps to see to, but it was such a perfect day when I woke that I promised myself a treat. I really feel I deserve it. I've been doing my duty nobly in town, whilst my heart was at Westwick."

"Was it?" He steadied his voice and steered ahead, absurdly happy.

"When I saw Sister Ann," Josephine told him merrily, "I stood up and waved to her."

"You couldn't have felt half so pleased as I did when I saw Élise."

"Now, David, I've told you before I won't have you flirting with my maid!"

He caught her mischievous glance and laughed.

"Yes, I might have phrased it better. Élise was merely a symbol—or rather the true meaning of 'angel'; a 'messenger' from the gods. It's funny to think that their wings were evolved from those on the feet of Mercury. At least that's one hypothesis. I fancy that Élise would prefer to wear hers about her ankles! She's very proud of her feet. A bit of a pagan, too, between the intervals of Mass. Don't let her lead you astray at Les Lecques. The South is a dangerous land."

"You will have to come and keep me in order."

Heron agreed, divided between his sense of humour and that of revolt. He found it, at odd moments, hard enough to restrain *himself!*

They were climbing a long hill, with cottages like stepping-stones, dumped down in strips of gardens, forming a broken causeway. The road drifted past a church with a graveyard, tree-embowered and a stark vicarage suffering from proximity to the high elms and patched with damp. The paint was peeling off the gate; no smoke came from the chimneys. It suggested that battle with poverty which the ministers of a gospel breathing "faith, hope and charity" wage now all over a land that prides itself on being Christian.

A hundred yards farther on, a sense of cheer and solid comfort offered an agreeable contrast. Set back in a little

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square where the road widened was an inn, old as the church itself, but in good repair, the porch reared high above a flight of stone steps, destined in the centuries past to facilitate descent from the coaches.

An old sign-board swung above it on which traces of a dragon, erect on its tail and facing St. George had withstood time and weather. On either side were spotless windows, the blinds straight, with brass flower-pots gleaming between the curtains. An archway, with a cobbled pavement beneath it, framed the approach to the stables. Smoke rose from the crooked chimneys, adding the touch of warmth and life. "Welcome" was written all over the front as vividly as the legend "Despair" on the poverty-stricken vicarage.

All this swept through Heron's mind as he brought the runabout round in a curve. He decided it was the revenge of Time. Once the Church held all the power, forbidding secular education and the enlightenment of the peasants, relying on superstition to wax fat at their expense. Now temporal power had crumbled. In turn, the priests were being sweated, albeit undeservedly, paying in poverty and labour for the sins and greed of the mighty abbots; and much later, of the men who had held good livings by virtue of birth and family influence, irrespective of "vocation."

The balance would only be redressed when the country called for religion as it now called for education. Heron saw no signs of this. Even the war had not stirred Christianity from its long torpor. Protestantism was divided against itself. The Church feared and despised the Chapel. Only reunion could save it; a religion that offered one creed to all, one hope, and one salvation.

He stopped the car before the inn and looked up at the old sign-board.

Josephine followed his glance.

"Have you ever noticed," asked Heron, "that in the pictures of St. George and the Dragon we carefully omit the maiden who was the main cause of the trouble? In

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Italian pictures she's in the foreground; but here we fight for the love of fighting—the British scorn for romance."

"Yet here lives Mrs. Mitchell, more powerful than any dragon. Your *dear* Mrs. Mitchell!" Josephine looked mischievous.

"*Touché!*" laughed Heron. He swung his legs clear of the wheel and reached the ground on the further side. He had opened the door of the car and was helping Josephine to disentangle herself from the rug when a woman appeared in the porch, middle-aged, neat and smiling.

"Why, it's Mr. Heron!" She bustled out to greet her guests. "And Mrs. Merriman, too, I declare. How are you keeping, ma'am? It's a long time since we've seen you in Tarne."

"I'm very well. How is Joe?" Josephine shook hands with her.

"Rather poorly, thank you, ma'am. He's been laid up with his gout again, but he's downstairs to-day. And grumbling—always a good sign!" Her lips parted humorously, showing a set of perfect teeth that seemed the last touch needed to set off her clear-skinned, healthy face. "He'll be glad to see Mr. Heron if there's time for a few words after tea. That is, if you've come for tea?"

"We have." Heron, again in the car, was steering it through the archway. He called back over his shoulder, "Can we have the little sitting-room?"

Mrs. Mitchell's face clouded.

"I'm sorry, sir. It's engaged." She turned to Josephine who was making her way indoors. "If only I'd known before! But the coffee-room's empty, if you can make shift with that?"

"Of course." Josephine noticed that the landlady seemed disturbed, more than the trifle warranted.

The inn was well known to hunting people, excellent in its simple appointments. Heron had stayed there a whole summer whilst his cottage was being prepared. The room in question was reserved for the best occasional visitors, a

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cheerful little place with some good old furniture that had belonged to Joe Mitchell's grandfather.

"They shouldn't have had it if I'd been about," Mrs. Mitchell ran on. "But the maid's fresh and knew no better. I daren't tell Joe—he'd be that vexed."

"But it doesn't matter in the least," Josephine tried to soothe her. They passed into the coffee-room. "What a lovely fire! This *is* cosy. It's rather cold driving to-day."

"The wind's in the north," said the landlady. "I shouldn't be surprised at snow." She drew up a chair to the hearth. "You sit down and have a warm, ma'am, whilst I hurry up the tea."

She was off, active and capable, down the passage that led to the kitchen. Josephine could hear Heron chaffing her, as he chose this short cut from the yard with the privilege of a favoured guest. "Cream—and some of your strawberry jam. Can't be beat—like yourself!" And the landlady's retort: "Now, Mr. Heron, I don't believe you. You said you'd put me in a book and Joe's been looking out for it. But it's quick come and go with you, like all you young gentlemen."

Josephine smiled. Was Heron young? She turned an amused face to him as he entered the low-beamed room, with its old sporting prints, where the pink coats shone bright in the glow of the burning logs.

"*I* heard you—flirting with Mrs. Mitchell! Pull up the other arm-chair and give me all the latest gossip."

Heron was groping under a table. He produced a fat footstool and planted it against the fender.

"There!" He lifted her little feet on to it, found a cushion and tucked it behind her shoulders. "How's that?"

She laughed at him.

"It's all very well. You're only pretending to be gallant universally!"

"Am I?" His blue eyes twinkled. They lingered on her delicate face, faintly flushed by the warmth and framed by the thrown-back motor-veil. "Then I'll go one step

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farther and say you're looking fine to-day. Have I seen that hat before?"

"*Have* you!" she mocked. "It's nearly as ancient as the car."

"Sorry." Heron smiled. "I wanted to draw your attention to the fact that I'm wearing a new suit."

"Never!" She felt the cloth of his sleeve. The hand below his cuff clenched. By an effort he kept his arm rigid. Quite unconscious of his trouble, she fingered the stuff for a moment. "It's nice. I always love dark blue." She paused, hearing a sound outside. Heron had left the door ajar and it had now swung open, obeying the worn hinges. A girl's shrill laugh came across to them from the sitting-room opposite. It seemed familiar to Josephine. "I wonder who's there," she said lazily, for the hot fire was taking effect.

"I gather it's a loving couple that doesn't come up to Mrs. Mitchell's rigid conception of 'the gentry.' They've been there two solid hours. To comfort her, I suggested she should charge for the room."

"How unfeeling of you, David." She put her finger to her lip. "Sh! They're coming out. Don't move—we shall see them pass in the glass." Her eyes were fixed on the mirror over the low mantelpiece and Heron's gaze followed hers. In the silence they heard a man's voice, youthful and familiar.

"Righto! I'll bring the horses round to the front door and mount you there. Looks better, don't it?"

There followed a double laugh. Then across the shining mirror passed the reflection of a figure in a cord suit, with a stock tie fastened by a gold horse-shoe: Oliphant, the Delaporte's groom!

Heron whistled under his breath, as the footsteps died away.

"No wonder Mrs. Mitchell felt her best parlour outraged. Rather cheek of him to——" He stopped, startled by the expression in his companion's face. "What's the matter?"

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She leaned forward, her eyes wide, full of a bewildered disgust.

"David, I believe it's *Carrie* who's in there! I heard her laugh, but couldn't place it at the moment. Isn't it—horrible?"

"It can't be." Heron looked grave. "She wouldn't dare. So near to Westwick. Besides——"

Josephine stood up.

"I'm going to see." She glanced at herself in the mirror, summoning courage from her reflection, as women will, in a crisis. "If I'm mistaken I can say that I thought the room was empty."

Heron vainly protested.

"She'll be rude to you."

"That doesn't matter. It's better than breaking the Colonel's heart. I shall try and frighten her. You stay here and prevent Oliphant from interfering."

"I will," said Heron, his jaw setting, his face more than ever like that of a mastiff. "I suppose you're right, but I don't like it."

He watched Josephine cross the passage, her head high, and open the door of the private sitting-room. It was closed behind her. He knew by this sign that the guess was correct and his heart sank. The pluck of her! That little creature, all spirit and flame, the antithesis of the other woman, a creature of earth and of base desires.

Inside the room Josephine was facing Carrie, taken aback by the unforeseen intrusion. She was dressed in a riding-habit and looked neater than usual save for her disordered hair which she was in the act of smoothing, her hard hat on the mantelpiece. She clutched it now and glared sideways at the unwelcome visitor.

"You!" She thrust out her chin.

"Yes." Josephine struck first. "What are you doing in here, Carrie, alone with Mrs. Delaporte's groom?"

She saw fear and anger strive for mastery in the freckled face. Carrie fell back on bluff.

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"Having tea—like yourself." She risked the shot and followed it up. "With David Heron, I suppose?"

Josephine disdained reply.

Carrie, mistrusting silence, altered her manner slightly.

"I dare say you think it odd, rather unconventional, but I wanted tea after a ride, and since Oliphant has taught me riding all these months—without payment, mind you—I thought I'd show him a little attention. One that he'd appreciate." Even to her, it sounded lame.

"Does Colonel Brackney approve of this form of attention?" asked Josephine. "Will he like it when I tell him?"

Carrie's long face blanched.

"You won't! It would be a mean trick; get Oliphant into trouble." She spoke hotly, obeying an impulse to trade on a sense of fair play.

"I think that answers my question." Josephine glanced at the table. An empty bottle of beer stood with a dirty glass near the tea-tray and, in a saucer used for ashes, was the stump of a cigar, by the remains of cigarettes. The room was hot, reeking with smoke and a faint aroma of the stables. Her nostrils curled as she drank it in. "This sort of thing must stop." She spoke with authority. "Otherwise I shall write myself to Mrs. Delaporte. She is attached to your people and would shrink from any scandal connected with her establishment. It will probably mean dismissing the servant whom you have done your best to spoil—at the risk of your good name."

"To spoil!" Carrie caught her up. "Perhaps you don't know that Oliphant was an officer during the war and accustomed to mix with gentlemen on equal terms?" She was working up to a counter-attack and she paid no heed to the quiet correction, "An officer's *servant*," but swept on, a malicious light in her ferrety eyes. "I don't see there's much difference between my having tea with him and your entertaining a *butcher's* son—since you make so much of class distinctions!"

Josephine stared at her.

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"I don't understand you. Please explain."

"I'm speaking of Torquil—your latest admirer!" Carrie laughed nastily. "His father is a butcher in a little town called Ovingdale where Oliphant's people live. He knew Torquil as a boy—recognized him walking with you. And you brought him to call on my uncle, although you're so particular! He isn't as good as Oliphant—not so respectable. There's a queer story about his birth. His mother was lady's-maid at a big house in the neighbourhood, left in disgrace and married the butcher. Torquil was born six months later! The butcher claims to be his father, but no one knows exactly. I suppose all this is news to you?"

She was openly insolent. "Shows that one should be careful in accusing other people!"

But Josephine had recovered herself.

"Torquil has nothing to do with the present case. Besides, I should not care to take Oliphant's word concerning him. Wherever he comes from, Torquil is a well-educated man, an author, and my husband's friend. The story sounds most unlikely. You forget that he was at Cambridge."

Carrie sneered triumphantly.

"That's the fishy part—I'd not finished. The Squire took an *unusual* interest in his wife's late maid, even after her hurried marriage! There's a secondary public school at Ovingdale and Torquil was sent there with the Squire's financial help. He took a scholarship for Cambridge and came a cropper—his own fault! He posed as being a connection of his patron and got in with a good set. Unluckily a fellow pupil at Ovingdale turned up at the same college and gave him away. The war broke out and he enlisted. To save his face, I imagine. Not that I dislike the man or despise him for his lowly birth." Her voice was assured and unctuous. "Anyhow he fought for us, and it's a democratic age. But it's rather rich your dropping on me for encouraging his old playmate!"

The taunt missed Josephine; she was too much absorbed

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in Carrie's disclosures. The story supplied many missing links in the young author's confidences on the moonlit night in the garden. It accounted for his bitterness and his hatred of the ruling classes. Josephine was no snob and Torquil's talent set him apart. She respected him for his early struggles and his strenuous efforts towards education. What jarred on her was the deceit practised at Cambridge on his friends. Even here she found an excuse. If the Squire, as Carrie hinted, had been responsible for his birth, hadn't the son a certain claim, that of the *bar sinister?* But then, the Squire had ruined Torquil's mother. She frowned and became suddenly conscious of the silence and Carrie's triumphant smile.

"Thinking it over?" the girl suggested.

"No. I've quite made up my mind. I shall not discuss things further, but unless you cease your rides and meetings with Oliphant I shall do as I said. That is, warn Mrs. Delaporte of the gossip round her groom's name and the use you are making of her horses."

The last point frightened Carrie, aware of long hours in the saddle.

"I've never been out so late before. It's not likely to happen again," she admitted sullenly.

Josephine nodded.

"Very well. But I've warned you, and I *mean* it. Now, if you will put on your hat, Mr. Heron and I will see you off. This should check further gossip. Mrs. Mitchell can be trusted, but she can't prevent chatter among the men about the place."

Carrie opened her mouth to retort, met Josephine's eyes and changed her mind.

The programme was carried out in full. Oliphant, waiting with the horses, eyed the pair curiously as they stood in the porch, the landlady close at hand, and admired Mrs. Delaporte's mare. He had the sense to fall behind Carrie as she trotted off and to touch his hat to her friends. The final touch to the comedy was added by Mrs. Mitchell, who

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was not in the least deceived by Heron's jovial manner. She turned to Josephine, her comely face apologetic, her voice vexed and motherly:

"To think that the likes o' they should have kept you waiting for your tea, ma'am!"

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CHAPTER VII

IN the hurry of departure, Josephine had little time to think of Carrie's disclosures, and the incident faded from her mind when she reached Les Lecques. She was captured by the familiar charm of the South; the light and vivid colour missed in the grey years of war. It was like meeting a long-lost friend. Eagerly she picked up the threads of the sunny Riviera life, enchanted by her emancipation and fresh scenes to explore.

Merriman hurried across for Christmas and this crowned her sense of pleasure, though she did not think him looking well. He was thinner, with weary lines in his face, due to incessant business worries. His packers had been out on strike. It had led to a rise in wages throughout his entire staff. The price of paper was still increasing and everything else in the publishing line showed the same tendency. There was little margin for profits. His authors, too, were feeling the pinch of the high cost of living and the enhanced price of books. No one was satisfied. Several well-known firms had failed, others had amalgamated. Merriman quoted the instance of an historic house that employed a single traveller now instead of its normal half a dozen.

"Penny-wise and pound-foolish," he commented as he sat on the terrace overhanging the sea and poured out his pent-up troubles into Josephine's sympathetic ears. "I'm *adding* to mine. The only chance is to build up against better times; hold on, at the risk of a loss. But it's anxious work, my dear. Still you'd rather I did this than put up the shutters, wouldn't you?"

"I should think so!" She smiled proudly. "But couldn't we economize, let the London house and have a flat?

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Westwick is really our home and we don't need that huge place. It means far too many servants and is empty the greater part of the year. You could always entertain at your club or at some good restaurant."

"Yes. It's not a bad idea. Still just at present it might be unwise—cause comment," he decided. "I shouldn't care, except for you and the years ahead. I want to leave you secure, my dearest, when I'm gone." His face was sad.

"Don't!" She slipped a hand into his. "You're not to talk of such things."

"It eases my mind," said Merriman. "Besides it's only natural and right that I should. Life's uncertain, and there's the difference in our ages; which reminds me—last week I went down to Westwick to see Heron. I've asked him to be my trustee—in the place of poor old Scudamore—together with my brother. I don't know a sounder man or one whom I could trust so surely to study your interests. I'm glad to say that he consented, with a single stipulation. That I shouldn't leave him any money!"

Josephine nodded.

"How like David!"

"Yes. You're not to mention it, but I'm making it up to him by a legacy of some 'first editions' which I know he will prize. I hope you approve of this?"

"Of course I do. What a nice idea!"

"Then there's another thing," Merriman went on. "I've altered my will a little; cut out some minor legacies. Everything now comes to you. You'll need it in these changed times. And—it's unconditional."

She looked up, faintly puzzled.

"What do you mean by that?"

Merriman smiled.

"Simply, my dear, that there's no clause about remarriage. I've always felt it the meanest trick a man can play on a faithful wife who has brought him love and sympathy. No, don't turn away like that!" He had seen her recoil, her face reproachful. "I know exactly what's in your mind, but you're young. If happiness comes your way

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after I'm gone, take it, dear, without any vague regrets, and remember that I wished it. Honestly." His voice quivered. "I dread the loneliness for you, without parents or children —a solitary old age." He put up a hand to shield his eyes from the glare which suddenly hurt them, and added, with a trace of emotion, "So long as it's the right man. One in whom you can trust—who would be good to my Josephine."

"Richard!" Her arms went round him. She peered up under the shading hand. "Why are you talking like this? You're not hiding anything from me?"

He patted her cheek.

"I'm all right—a bit fagged by my journey still, and anxious to get business over before enjoying my holiday. I just wanted you to know about my will. That was all."

"You're sure?"

He drew her on to his knee.

"Do I *look* ill?" He laughed and kissed her. "Now—there's another matter—— You comfy?"

She nodded, smoothing his hair, still crisp and vigorous, leaning against him and aware of the quick beat of his heart. Too quick, surely? Her fingers slipped to his hand, which was dry and feverish.

"I shall take his temperature," she thought. "I hope he hasn't caught a chill."

She listened. Merriman was speaking.

"I'm worried about Torquil. You know he has had a bad attack of influenza and pneumonia? It was touch and go for a time. Luckily he pulled through, but it's left him a wreck. I went to see him. He can't work and he's in despair. Alone, and still very weak, in squalid rooms that made me long to put my hand in my pocket. But Torquil's too proud for charity. Still, there's some money due on his book, though not enough for the change he needs. The doctor, whom I saw for a moment, says he must go away to a warm and dry climate, suggested Torquay or Cornwall." Merriman paused. He had seen his own idea reflected in Josephine's pitiful eyes.

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"Would you like him to come here?" An eager light was in her face.

"It all depends," said her husband, "on whether you'd find him in the way. If he comes, it's for a long visit. The journey's an expensive one and it would be absurd to send him back to England before the cold winds were over. I was thinking it out in the train. If you'd have him for the first month he would probably be strong enough to go on alone, somewhere. Once in the South it wouldn't cost him any more than London lodgings, and he could write—he'd be perfectly happy. I should be willing to advance him money on the book in hand—it's excellent from all accounts—if that made things easier."

"You're a darling!"

Merriman's eyes twinkled.

"I'm thinking of myself, too. I consider him a sound investment. Torquil will recognize this point!" He chuckled, foreseeing the interview. "I know exactly how to approach him. The question is, will he bore you?"

"No. He can always write. Kate is coming next month and she will help me entertain him."

"Kate Rollit?" Merriman asked.

"Yes. She's now at Beaulieu and proposes a visit to Les Lecques." She referred to a distant cousin who spent most of the year abroad, in pursuit of the sunshine.

The widow of an Indian judge, with moderate means, she preferred this manner of life to the cares of an establishment. Wherever she went she gathered friends, attracted by her personality, high ideals and startling speech. She dabbled in Spiritism, and had a somewhat bewildering habit of referring to the dear-departed as though he were in the flesh beside her. "I must ask Maurice," she would say when some arrangement was mooted. She even consulted him on the chance of a number turning up at the tables, in her mild flutters at Monte Carlo. If Fortune went against her she would absolve her long-dead spouse by hinting mysteriously at the intervention of "mischievous spirits."

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Comely, buxom and sympathetic, in old-fashioned widow's weeds, invariably cheerful, she became a centre of interest and amusement in the small hotels and *pensions* she graced with her generous presence. The possession of a few good jewels in ancient settings and the fact that "Maurice" had been a well-known judge placed her socially and balanced her eccentricities. To Josephine, she was a joy. She had never forgotten an incident long since in Mentone when Kate had waved a startled stranger away from the seat by her side explaining that Maurice "occupied" it!

"She'll try and convert Torquil." Merriman looked amused. "But I don't recommend table-turning in his present state of health. He's a mass of nerves, poor boy. You see your way to having him?"

"Easily. I shall enjoy it. I like fussing over people, and he ought to get strong here." She added simply, "David will be disappointed. He wanted to come in the New Year but I daren't have them together. He doesn't get on with Torquil."

Merriman was studying her with a whimsical expression.

"Heron can visit you later. You'll find him restful—after the other! All the same, I'm fond of the boy. He's conceited, but there's a charm about him, and I respect him as a worker. I don't believe he ever squanders a penny piece on amusement. He lives for his writing—and he'll succeed." He paused. "I wonder where he comes from?" Josephine's slender body stiffened, and Merriman smiled. "You know?"

She nodded.

"I've heard—something. Not from Torquil, but through a person I don't trust. It may be pure gossip." She hesitated. "If you like——"

But Merriman checked her.

"No, don't tell me." He saw that her loyalty was involved. "Come and give me tea instead. This warm weather makes me thirsty. But it's heavenly, after London."

She slipped down from his knee.

"We'll have it here. I'll tell the maid."

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He watched her make her way indoors with her light and youthful step, and his tired face grew wistful. The strong temptation to carry her back with him on his return to England caught him, and then the alternative: to remain here, neglecting his business. He resisted both—for her sake. The change was doing her worlds of good and there was the future, dependent on him. His mind wandered back to his will. Heron's face rose up before him.

"And she doesn't know—bless her heart! I only guessed it myself last week, although I've seen them together for years. Perhaps the senses become more acute as one approaches——" He pulled himself up. "I mustn't think of it, or she'll suspect." He leaned back and closed his eyes, feeling the clamorous beat of his pulse shaking life out of him like the sands of an hour-glass. "The doctor said it might be years. I'm going to put it out of my mind."

Nevertheless, he extended his holiday to a fortnight. Fearful of her intuition he upheld the idea of a chill, allowed her to nurse him and pet him up, but took his own medicines, the result of his visit to Harley Street. Her misconception was an excuse for avoiding exertion and he insisted on hiring a car from Marseilles, with a well-paid chauffeur. He engaged it for three months and laughed at her verdict, "Extravagance!"

"I refuse to have you jolted about in that abominable conveyance which brought me from the station. It's not economy if it means employing a bone-setter! We'll economize in Paris by buying your summer frocks. At the present rate of exchange, and considering that the costume of Eve seems to be the prevailing fashion, we shall profit by the trip."

"I don't trust you in Paris. We went there for our honeymoon and even then you squandered money."

"*'Even then'!*" He laughed at her. "It doesn't seem eight years ago. You don't look a day older."

"That's because I've been spoilt." She gave him a sunny glance.

"Spoilt by your old husband?"

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"You're not old!"

He choked back a sigh.

"Then let's go over to Marseilles in the car, dine at the *Réserve* and see a highly immoral play that is running at the theatre. Then we'll drive home by moonlight. Put on your prettiest frock and I'll sit beside you and glower at the *jeunesse dorée* if they dare to admire my wife—like a true British tourist! You'll come?"

"If you're sure you won't be tired?"

"Not a bit. It will do me good. I'll go along to the post office and telephone for a box."

"Oh, not a box! Stalls will do."

"You leave it to me. I like room for my long legs. Go and make yourself beautiful."

She succeeded, in Merriman's fond eyes, and the evening was a red-letter one, as unexpected entertainments so often turn out to be. The drive home, muffled in wraps, through the sweetly-scented air, as the breeze blew off the sea through orange flowers and mimosa, drove away all trace of fatigue and Merriman's spirits rose. He dared once more to look ahead.

"Next winter," he told his wife, "I'll take a real holiday, and I think we'll go to Algiers—have a villa of our own."

"When Torquil has made your fortune?" She laughed at him above her furs.

"Yes." Merriman looked wicked. "If you smile at him like that he won't desert his publisher. A lot lies in your hands!" He thought for a moment and added, "I should like to see Torquil in love. He'd be so angry with himself for his weakness. It would do him good."

"And what about me?" A dimple deepened at the corner of her mouth. "A sedate, married woman, divided between your jealousy and an aggressive courtship?"

"You wouldn't notice it," said her husband. "That's the blessed part of you. You'd be infinitively motherly—the last insult to conscious youth! Meanwhile, I'd like to remind you that you belong to me and I don't allow 'followers.'"

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"I don't need anyone but you." Her candid eyes met his, suddenly grave.

"Sure?" he persisted.

"Quite sure."

It was the truth, yet Merriman felt a swift pang of jealousy. Long ago he had realized that Josephine held but a small conception of the heights and depths of passionate love. She was unawakened, a child in emotion. Faithful, deeply attached to him and grateful for the protection that had sheltered her, a lonely orphan, since the day when she had met her husband, her love was that of a girl for a loyal and devoted guardian. Was it a sign of her temperament, the flesh as delicate as the spirit, or merely the sleep of ignorance? This was the question he asked himself. Merriman had been no saint in his early years. He understood women; but Josephine stood apart, sacred, beyond his experience. And this was the charm that held a man by nature an epicure and keenly alive to beauty in its highest form—that of truth. She was the crowning treasure of his ardent collector's soul, something rare and unique. But he foresaw that the day might come when Josephine would be changed, for better or worse, the miracle accomplished by a younger man, who would awaken her to passion. His Josephine. Would it be Heron? For a moment his faith wavered. Then he felt a hand slip softly into his and the gentle voice he loved murmured:

"Tired?"

"No, my darling. And you?"

"Just happily tired," said Josephine.

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CHAPTER VIII

WHEN Torquil stepped out of the night *rapide* at Marseilles, bewildered by the stir of the busy station, he was almost too weary to find his way to the train awaiting his on the coast line to Toulon. Still weak from his illness, the journey, started in high hope, had become a dragging nightmare, sleep rendered impossible by a crowded carriage—the windows sealed—that jarred and bumped as they roared along over the uneven rails, heavily taxed during the war.

The relief of a fresh and empty compartment, as the slow train moved out, was marred by the fact that he dared not give way to his intolerable drowsiness for fear of missing his destination. But he drew down the blinds beside him to avoid the sudden white glare between the seemingly endless tunnels, too ill to care where he was and to face the early light.

At St. Cyr la Cadière he stumbled out, sick and faint, with a sense of unreality, to hunt for his heavy luggage. The volubility of an official, who refused to render it up and endeavoured in vain to point out to the harassed traveller that it must wait for the Customs, proved the last disillusion. After a feeble spurt of anger, Torquil found himself gently propelled through the *barrière* into the road, where Josephine's chauffeur rescued him. There followed a blinding drive between grotesquely lopped poplars towards a shimmering blue line, that was finally blotted out by a village, which they entered.

The car stopped. Through a mist, he descended at the door of a Villa that slept, its green shutters closed, and was

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greeted by a dark woman whose face seemed familiar. Torquil tried to find his voice, in the cool, tiled hall, clutched at a chair behind him and collapsed utterly.

The next thing he realized was a wiry arm that supported his shoulders, whilst a comforting voice in his own language was urging him to drink from a glass pressed to his pallid lips.

"Monsieur is dead of fatigue." Élise, compassionate, tilted the glass and Torquil gulped. "Monsieur must seek 'is bed, and repose 'imself, without delay."

The cognac ran like fire through his veins and slowly his vision cleared. He struggled up.

"I'm sorry. Stupid of me! I've been ill," he explained jerkily.

"One can see zat." Élise was shocked at the change in the young man's appearance. "If Monsieur would lean on my arm? 'Is room is on ze ground floor. A good sleep is what 'e needs, after 'is so long journey. Madame is still *au lit*—she will not expect to see Monsieur till lunch. *Par ici*——" She helped him along the corridor and opened a door at the end.

He found himself in a room filled with a cool, green light that filtered through the *paravents* and was soothing after the dusty glare. Élise left him, to reappear with his coffee and rolls, over her arm a faded pair of pyjamas.

"If Monsieur would use zese—zey belong to Mr. Merriman—until 'is own luggage arrive." She laid them on the bed beside him.

"It's at the station," Torquil complained. "They wouldn't let me take it away."

"It is always so by zis train." Élise smiled reassuringly. "*Ze douane* opens at eleven and, if Monsieur 'as nozing to declare, ze chauffeur will see to it. Is zere anysing more Monsieur desires?" She frowned as Torquil begged for a bath. "Later on. It would not be wise for Monsieur in 'is present state. I will see zat Monsieur is called in time —when ze water will be 'otter."

He was too tired to resist, touched as well by the kindness

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in the Brittany maid's face, so austere when last seen. For her motherly instincts were aroused.

"Au revoir, monsieur—et dormez bien!" She went out noiselessly.

Torquil obeyed her commands. Lost in his host's pyjamas, he welcomed the cool touch of the pillows. The last thing he realized, as sleep claimed him, was the sense of an unfamiliar, spicy smell that drifted up from the waxed floor, and a delicate rustle beyond the shutters like innumerable slips of paper, stirred by a playful breeze. It rose and fell intermittently.

Rose and fell. . . . It was manuscript. Alive with swiftly forming phrases, the magical blend of long-sought words that printed themselves on his brain. If only he had the will to stir himself and capture them. . . . He tossed in his sleep as the dream pursued him; then slipped into deeper unconsciousness.

When he awoke, for the first moment, he thought himself still in the train on that endless night journey, the green shade drawn over the lamp. Relieved, he came to his senses and stared round the shuttered room, with its sparse furniture, polished floor and luxurious sense of space. The light had veered from the south window to the west one, facing his bed, and it was tinged with a faint rose. He groped for his watch on the table. Four o'clock? He was horrified. He sat up, wide awake, and became aware of a tray, with fruit and wine, by his bedside. A note lay on the plate. With a sense of guilt he opened it. How *could* he have overslept himself?

"Dear Torquil," he read.

"Sleep as long as you can and don't worry! I'm going out in the car this afternoon and I shan't expect to see you till dinner. Your luggage is here. Ring when you want it, but remember you've come to *rest*, and that this is Lotus land!

"Hoping you're better,

"J. L. M."

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He felt a lump rise in his throat. The loneliness of his long illness and the black depression left by it had shaken his fortitude. He was moved by this evidence of her kindness and by a swift desire to see Josephine and thank her.

He slipped out of bed and was aware of a new sense of vigour, also of a pang of hunger. But first, he must look through the window. He crossed the room and threw back the shutters. The dazzling light blinded him; he caught his breath, surprised, enchanted. For, below him, lay the sea.

Peacock blue, with indigo shadows, it stretched away into space to meet a sky already touched by the sunset and shot with amethyst. He had never seen such colouring. It was not the surface blue of the water he had watched on English shores; it reached down through endless depth, bearing translucent light with it. And the sky had the same quality, as though the veil had been torn from its face, to reveal infinite worlds beyond.

Across the southern front of the Villa ran a broad balcony. Torquil reached for his overcoat, flung it on and stepped out. From here, he could have thrown a pebble into the sea, where it sucked the stones of a little grey pier, a broken-down landing-stage, jutting out from the strip of beach, immediately below the house. On this a barefooted urchin stood, with a primitive fishing-rod, his eyes glued on his float, that barely moved on the tide-less ripple. To Torquil's right was a headland, with a ruined Martello tower, and the bay swept inwards, sheltered, serene, and guarded by the eastern shore, behind which rose the curve of hills, the first outposts of the Alps.

He leaned over the iron rail, drinking in the perfect scene, and saw there was a floor beneath him on this side of the Villa. For it was built on a slope. He could hear a throaty voice singing and a clatter of cooking pots. Firewood and fir-cones were piled on the platform of beaten earth outside the kitchen door, and beyond this a little stream, shallow and milky-blue, flowed eagerly down to the sea.

On the bank knelt a pair of women, their sleeves rolled

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up to their shoulders, vigorously slapping wet piles of linen on the boulders that cleared the water. Torquil, intrigued, was watching them and their primitive laundry-work when he was roused by the soft rustle he had noticed earlier. He turned his head to search for the cause. The sound came from a giant palm weighed down with its burden of leaves, the tapering ends burnt by the sun. Crisp and dry, as the wind moved them, they brushed one against another.

Now he could see the Villa garden, curiously devoid of green to his English eyes but relieved by the myrtle and silver note of eucalyptus and mimosa, heavy with canary bloom. The garden seemed to consist of paths with stony banks where freesia flourished, heliotrope and tiny roses. But the parched earth cried out for water, and sand took the place of grass.

On the lower terrace above the sea were wicker chairs and a bright awning, a shelter from the noonday sun. As he stood, breathing in the air, light and filled with southern scents, he saw a slender figure emerge and glance up at the windows. Before he had time to retreat, aware of his ruffled head and scanty garments, Josephine waved. She mounted the few steps leading to the higher level.

"How are you?" she cried laughing. "Feeling rested, I hope?"

"Rather! But very ashamed of myself." He leaned down over the rail, devoutly hoping that his coat covered his bare feet. "I only woke ten minutes ago, and I couldn't resist looking out. How lovely it all is!"

"Then get up and come down. We'll have tea in the garden."

"I will. It was awfully good of you to let me sleep on like that."

"Nonsense! You do as you like here. That's the beauty of the place." She smiled at him, her face uplifted, her slim throat gleaming white, soft hair stirred by the breeze. She looked younger than ever, he thought, with a faint touch of mischief in her luminous grey eyes as though she divined his embarrassment. "Put on a warm suit. It gets

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chilly after sunset, quite another temperature. Ring for Élise and order your bath—the other servants don't speak English. But perhaps I'm insulting you?" Her laugh rippled up to him.

"No, I'm a poor French scholar. I must try and improve myself."

"Not at first. No lessons and no work, until you're stronger. You'll find me most severe!" She saw him make a little grimace, and was prepared for his protest.

"But I shall *feel* like writing here." The rustle of the palm beside him awoke a dormant memory. "I started a book in my dreams." His thin face grew wistful, but Josephine shook her head.

"Then forget it! It will all come back when you've regained your health. Besides, think of the fresh copy that Les Lecques will provide? By and by, you shall write." She checked his response with a quick gesture. "Go and dress—here's Mrs. Rollit!"

Torquil, in a panic, fled. He drew the shutters together and peered out through the slats, curious to see his fellow-guest. Mr. Merriman had alluded to her without adding any details beyond the fact of her relationship to his wife.

Torquil saw a large lady, in widow's weeds, who carried herself with dignity, briskly approach Josephine, a holland umbrella over her head. Her rings sparkled in the sunshine; she looked leisurely and assured, and his heart sank. He placed her at once as a member of "Society" and imagined she would patronize him; that she was one of a class who asked, not what a man did, but what he was, pointedly!

Voices floated up to him. First that of his hostess inquiring if "Kate" had enjoyed her walk; then Mrs. Rollit's warm contralto:

"Very much—a perfect day. Unluckily my suspender came down as I reached the village. But I remembered we were in France, where nothing of that sort matters. A dear old man lent me a pin. So practical, the French peasants."

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Torquil choked with surprise and laughter. Mrs. Rollit proceeded calmly in her deep, well-bred voice:

"Yes, a very pleasant walk. I had a chat with Madame Simône at that little hotel on the beach. Her daughter from Arles is there now with a new baby, on a visit. And a nurse—a *nou-nou*, all cap and ribbons! I call it ridiculous! She ought to nurse the child herself. I told her so. It's only pride—just to impress the neighbours. I said to her—she's quite young—'What do you suppose, my dear, the Almighty gave you——' "

From Josephine came a nervous interruption:

"Hush! Torquil's awake. He'll hear you."

"Dear me," said Mrs. Rollit. "Is he as young as all that? I hope that I shan't have to study each word I say before him! As you know, I always speak my mind—even when I talk to Maurice."

Who was Maurice, Torquil wondered. Was the Villa full of guests? He put the question to Élise as she led him to the bath-room and was perplexed by her reply.

. . . . . .

He soon learned who Maurice was. As real and inseparable an adjunct to the widow as the holland umbrella or the marquise ring on her finger which had graced three generations.

He took to "Kate." She was indiscreet in speech but amazingly tactful in habit. Fond of solitude—with Maurice—she would vanish and leave the other guest to enjoy to the full Josephine's care in an undisturbed *tête-à-tête*. She was a great walker and disdained the use of the car. This allowed Torquil to usurp the seat by his hostess' side as they swept down the straight white roads to those curving ones mounting the hills, cut like shelves in the rock, with perilous corners and sheer descents.

At first these drives were curtailed, for he was very quickly tired and unused to an open-air life. He would lie for hours on the terrace, a book unread in his hand, and gaze out over the dazzling water, drowsy in the light and warmth, watching the humming-bird moths dart past to

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bore into the heart of a flower and rise again with their curious hum, like that of a distant Zeppelin. It was Josephine who pointed out his first locust and told Torquil of the swallow-tailed butterflies with their sulphur wings, long and pointed, the edges scalloped with chocolate, who would be the harbingers of summer.

Everything enchanted him. He was like a child loosed from school, adventuring on a treasure hunt. Josephine entered into the game, slaking his growing thirst for knowledge. She told him legends of the country. Of the great battle in the plains above Les Lecques where Marius with his Roman legions had destroyed the barbarian hordes that were plundering fair Provence, wiping them out utterly, under the counsels of Marthe, his Syrian prophetess. How from this mighty victory had been evolved the Christian legend of Sainte Marthe taming the Tarasque, a monster that stood for paganism. Torquil had read his *Tartarin*. Eagerly he begged for more.

He would lie there, eyes half-closed, and dream of a journey to Aix to see King Rene's *Book of Hours* in the beautiful library; or, further still, to St. Rémy with its Roman monuments and the bones of Hannibal's elephant piled up in the Rue du Géant.

Mrs. Rollit would join them for tea and take him into another world, with stories of people she had met in her sunny, wandering life. Never malicious, she yet possessed a sense of humor and caricature. She was full of Riviera gossip; from the source of a Russian dancer's jewels at Monte Carlo to the capture of a sedate British chaplain by a determined spinster in the old town at Bordighera.

She decided that Torquil was *not* "too young" to face her outspoken comments and, in the close intimacy of the sheltered Villa, her reckless tongue would wag on, unchecked by the hostess, weak from laughter.

"It's all very well scolding me," Kate would say cheerfully, "but it does that boy good to laugh. Fills his lungs with pure air."

"And his mind?" queried Josephine.

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Kate would snort and arrange her rings.

"He's not as innocent as he looks!"

"Now *now*," corrected Torquil, with a sly side-long glance at her.

His good looks were returning fast and the comely widow was not averse to the hint of a flirtation. She was tired of elderly admirers and Torquil could be very charming. Josephine would watch them, amused. If Mrs. Rollit waxed too sentimental, he would retire into his shell, or feign a sudden drowsiness. Kate would chuckle, fully aware of the careful limits he set himself; then, openly, make love to him. It was a part of his "cure"—what she called "taking him out of himself!" Maurice had "told" her to be "kind to a young man in poor health."

"He might be my son," she said, smiling, one morning to Josephine.

"Then you're bringing him up very badly," her cousin promptly retorted. "I'm shocked at you. That story last night made me blush!"

"It was very becoming, my dear," said the widow. And scored. Josephine was silenced.

Mrs. Rollit had not approved of her cousin's marriage to Merriman. She considered Richard "far too old." It would do Josephine good, she decided, to be with Youth for a change. A clever boy, too, like Torquil. And there was no fear of complications; Josephine was too quiet, and besides, he was not her equal in birth. She held no delusions on this point, although, as his health improved, a trace of his old arrogance and self-sufficiency returned.

Only from Josephine would he brook opposition. It was his unconscious surrender to her fragility and grace. Her easy friendliness forbade the suspicion of flirtation, yet she stirred him. He was supremely conscious of the romance that seemed to form as much a part of the southern land as the unconsidered, clustering roses that took the place of the English hawthorn. As the weeks passed on, he began to dread the coming day of separation, to treasure the hours he spent with her and to scheme ahead expeditions in which

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Mrs. Rollit took no part. Even in sleep, Josephine's face would rise before him, starry-eyed. He knew each familiar movement of her little hands that unconsciously copied the foreign gestures, and the quick tilt of her head on its slender throat when, interested, she would look up to his greater height, amused, thoughtful or touched with pity.

There were evenings when they strolled along the untidy little beach fringing the tideless waters when he longed to pick her up in his arms and run with all his returning strength away from Kate and the trim Villa to those magical violet hills, a conqueror like Hannibal, undaunted by the Alps. But he would not admit that it was love. It was physical unrest, the result of idle hours. He must work—that was the cure—resisting these side-paths of emotion. He scorned himself for his weakness, and ambition awoke from its long sleep.

Kate noticed a change in him; his silences and absorption. She put it down to calf-love, fully aware of his admiration for Josephine. It wouldn't hurt him, at his age. It lowered a young man's conceit. His manners were improving, too—Josephine's influence!

She watched the pair off one morning for a long-coveted expedition that would take the whole day. The hostess, in vain, had tried to persuade her to join in the picnic, but Kate had pleaded innumerable letters awaiting reply, and a disposition to laze, and read a recent French novel. They left her standing at the gate under the holland umbrella, cheerful as ever and independent, and settled down to their long drive.

They were going to visit the famous grotto where Mary Magdalene was reputed to have spent the last thirty years of her life in a penitence that had glorified Sainte Baume into a pilgrim's shrine. Here her daily tears had flowed, giving birth to the miracle of a stream that wandered through the plains to empty itself in the Bouches du Rhône.

Torquil was in silent mood and Josephine was content to lean back in the car and give herself up to the drowsy peace. They lunched by the wayside in an orchard, descend-

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ing in terraces edged by the cut-back vines, with silvery olive trees over their heads. Here and there pale wind-flowers nodded above the wiry grass with amaranths and spotted orchids. Ferns clustered in the stones.

Torquil had stretched himself full length, his elbows dug into the ground, his chin propped on his hands. He watched Josephine sip her coffee, the thermos flask that had held it safe between the roots of the tree. Her linen frock of *pervenche* blue was the right colour, he decided, against the supporting trunk. She smiled at him lazily over the rim of her cup.

"Well?"

"It's not well at all. I've a serious confession to make. I hope you won't be vexed with me, but I've been writing these last mornings. Early, before breakfast." He looked like a guilty schoolboy.

"I knew."

"How?" He was taken aback.

"Élise told me. She found a sheet of manuscript under your table when she was looking to see that the housemaid had polished the floor. But I hadn't the heart to scold you! If you work in moderation, I don't think it will hurt you now. Is it a new book?"

"Yes." He was inwardly relieved by the indulgent way she took it. "And a new departure, too. It's a modern romance—a love-story."

"With a happy ending?"

"I'm afraid so." He laughed, aware of the rueful note. "Tragedy and Les Lecques don't seem to go together. I can't be unhappy in this sunshine. And besides——" He hesitated, frowning.

"I hope you're putting Kate in it. She'd love that." Josephine smiled.

"I am. And *you*."

"Oh, no!" She recoiled instinctively from the suggestion.

"I must." His voice was low and earnest. "You're a part of Les Lecques, of—everything! If I don't I shall ruin the book. No one will know. I'll wrap it up. No

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portrait—just your character. Besides, I'm making you—unmarried." He paused. "I can see you like that. A girl." His eyes were averted.

"I would rather you didn't." She spoke gravely. "Do you know I've been married for eight years? You mustn't make me ridiculous."

"'Ridiculous'!" His voice was hot. He gazed past her at the olives, crestfallen. "I thought you'd like it. It's going to be my best book." His shoulders stiffened; he looked aggressive. Josephine saw that he was hurt.

"I like the idea behind it." She found herself in a cleft stick. "Yes, perhaps it's silly of me. Tell me more of the story?"

"Not yet." He shook his head. "I'm still wrestling with the construction. It's all rather new to me. As you know, my first books held very little about women. They were written against a background of war."

"But haven't you ever been in love?" She was curious. "I should think, at your age—as a matter of fact I don't know how old you are."

"I'm twenty-six," said Torquil. His eyes came round to her face with obvious question in them.

She answered it, without hesitation.

"And I was thirty-one last birthday. So, as you see, I can't pose as a girl!" The colour had stolen up under her skin. The confession had cost her a slight effort.

Torquil had placed her as twenty-eight. He smiled at the thought that crossed his mind, then voiced it.

"Nine years younger than Cleopatra at the height of her beauty and her charm. When she ruined Mark Antony." His voice changed on the last word with a sombre resentment.

"Ruined?" Her eyebrows went up. She was rather hazy about the story that had seemed to her one of deathless love.

"Why, of course! The greatest general of the age—trusted by Cæsar, embarked on a military mission—who let his victories go to seed—for the sake of a courtesan!"

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"Hardly that—a great queen."

"Birth makes no difference to morals," Torquil retorted hotly. "He had Rome at his feet, a vast empire, and he sacrificed power and duty for love."

"And you think power is finer than love?"

"Finer than passion, anyhow." He stood up and stretched himself. "I despise that—I always have."

"Perhaps you're right," said Josephine. "If Cleopatra had *really* loved Antony, she would have released him to his duty. A finer proof of devotion than making away with herself. But we should have lost a golden romance. If you had to choose"—she was teasing him now—"which would you prefer, Torquil? To whitewash Cleopatra, or retain the asp and Shakespeare's play?"

Torquil gave her a sharp glance. He was always suspicious of mockery.

"No good asking me. I don't understand women. Least of all, a 'serpent of Nile'! They interfere with a man's work."

Josephine's laugh rang out.

"That's hedging! No answer at all. It's a thorny point for an author, literature versus ethics! So I think I'll leave it and pack up." She reached for the thermos flask and drew back her hand sharply, to whisper, "Torquil, come here—quite quietly—and look."

He knelt down beside her as she pointed to a tuft of grass.

"Whatever is it? A sort of locust?"

"No, it's a Praying Mantis. Have you never read Cunninghame Graham's beautiful story about it? Oh, you must. It prays, its face turned to the east, with those curious front feet held up and folded together piously, all day long—when it's not fighting! The attitude is suggestive of a worshipper bending forward over a *prie-Dieu*. That's how it gets its name. To see two of them in battle is to realize the hidden savage. They fight to the death—it's stupendous!"

"Muscular Christianity," Torquil suggested dryly. "'If you don't believe, I'll knock you down.' I hate to spoil a

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good story, but it's praying now due *south*. There it goes!"

They watched it rise, like a skeleton locust, and sail away, on brittle, iridescent wings.

"The peasants capture them and keep them in little cages made of grass. They back their champions to fight. You must remember that for your book."

"Rather!" He helped her collect the scattered plates and pack them away in the picnic hamper, then went off to stir up the chauffeur who had retired to smoke in peace, one eye on the car.

Josephine could hear Torquil whistling as he sprang down the succeeding terraces where the earth was banked up against the mortarless, stone walls; a defence against the rain that would have destroyed the fertile levels holding the vine roots. It was good to see him getting so healthy, but she was a little troubled by their earlier conversation. He should have guessed that it might be awkward for her to figure in a novel—apparently, as the heroine—that was issued from her husband's house. If Richard should recognize her, she felt sure he would not like it. On the other hand, Torquil seemed to consider it a graceful attention! A pity he hadn't seen more of the world. She did not like to appear ungrateful, yet she resented the suggestion of all her kindness turned to 'copy.' It made her feel unsafe with him. And how furious David would be! Quite suddenly she longed for Heron and his advice at the present juncture.

Torquil hailed her from the road and she joined him in the waiting car, as the chauffeur packed away the hamper. They gathered pace on the dusty road, leaving a white cloud behind them. Torquil gave her a sidelong glance.

"Is anything worrying you?" It was said so anxiously that her courage failed her.

"Nothing." She smiled. She could not spoil the afternoon. He might change his mind about the book. In any case she could read it first.

"Sure? Then do explain to me how Mary Magdalene ever came to these parts? It's a long step from the Holy Land. I suppose it's only a legend?"

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"Yet Lazarus is said to be buried at Marseilles—in the crypts of St. Vincent. They even show his bones on fête days."

"That's simple." Torquil's dark eyes twinkled. "Do you remember Anatole France and the sacred relics in his *L'Ile des Pingouins?* Anyhow, Lazarus was resurrected to some purpose if he visited Les Lecques."

"You're not to scoff at the Scriptures. I like to believe the legends myself. They certainly bring home religion to the peasant mind and focus it. Like the ever open churches. It's a religion that suits the land."

"Yes. If I had been Mary Magdalene"—his sunburnt face looked wicked—"I should certainly have headed for France. I mean, I wouldn't have gone to England."

Josephine struggled against her amusement.

"Torquil!" She corrected him.

"Not in the winter," he amended. "Too cold, after Palestine. Tell me how she arrived?"

"On a raft with the three other Maries, Martha and Lazarus. They were cast adrift by the Jews, who feared to destroy them openly, and were driven to France by a great storm after leaving the port at Jaffa. Lazarus and his sister went to Marseilles. There she left him and wandered on to Sainte Baume. Mary Salome and Mary the mother of James, with their servant Sarah, the chosen saint of the gipsies, remained on the shore and built a cell. They are buried there in a fortress church, part of it tenth century, at Les Saintes Maries de la Mer, in the sandy desert of the Camargue. It's a place I want to see, and also Aigues-mortes, which is not far from there; a wonderful walled city built by Philip the Bold and from which the Crusaders set forth. But it can't be done in a day. It means sleeping a night at Arles."

"I could do it on my way home," said Torquil. He hesitated, and went on rather brusquely, "It's about time I made my plans. Do you know I've been here nearly a month?"

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"Are you tired of Les Lecques?" She smiled at him. "No? Then why talk of leaving yet? I want to see you quite strong and I'm afraid of your working too hard if you've no restraining hand. Besides, when Kate departs next week I've a girl coming to me from England, and you'll have to help me entertain her."

"A girl?" Torquil looked suspicious.

"Yes—a pretty one, too!" She was amused by his expression.

"I don't care for girls," said Torquil.

"You prefer women of Kate's years?" She was laughing openly now.

"Much. They've more sense. And they don't expect—expect a man——" He broke off, confused and surly. "Oh, you know what I mean. I loathe girls."

"Then I shall have to put Daisy off."

"Oh, could you? *Would* you?" He turned to her, his face alight, his eyes more eloquent than he knew. "It would be top-hole! I could write—I swear I wouldn't worry you—and read what I'd written in the evenings aloud, if you cared to hear it. You could help me no end. Say you mean it?" His voice pleaded.

She had not meant it in the least, but she was a little moved herself by his evident desire for her sole companionship.

"I'll see," she conceded. "Anyhow, you're not to dream of going yet. Why, you're only just alive again. You looked a ghost when you came."

"Lazarus—risen from the dead! A pretty true simile."

"There's an idea for a book," she suggested. "What he thought of this world when he returned to it. If only he had left a record?" A mystical light was in her eyes.

Torquil resented it. Like all sceptics he disliked evidences of another's faith.

"It was probably catalepsy, with complete unconsciousness. No, it's no good your frowning at me. I can't swallow miracles."

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"Although you're very superstitious?"

"To a certain extent. I don't believe in 'Maurice,' for instance."

They both laughed.

"It comforts Kate." Josephine spoke kindly.

"Exactly. He never answers back! I found that out. He only agrees; the pleasant side of matrimony. And he never interferes with her pleasures. He appears when he's wanted—not otherwise. I should rather like a spirit wife. To put away on a shelf, when I'm working, and take down and dust, in the intervals."

"You wait till you fall in love!" Josephine looked mischievous.

"That's a different thing," said Torquil. "I was speaking of *marriage*. I shall never marry," he added abruptly.

"You will." She nodded her head wisely.

He gave her a curious, scared glance.

"Not I. Too much of a risk."

"Look!" She touched him on the arm, her attention suddenly arrested by the scene that met her eyes as they rounded a sharp curve.

From the plain where a farm and hamlet sheltered rose towering heights, darkly wooded, with naked gaps of rocky cliff in the heart of the steep ascent. In one of these open spaces they could see a circular dark patch, blotting the limestone, midway between the valley and the sky-line. Josephine pointed to it.

"That's the mouth of the grotto. You see that tiny pointed dot on the very top of the ridge? It's the ruined chapel of St. Pilou. It was built by the monks, a Dominican order who lived below at Sainte Baume. The monastery's now an hotel."

"A good thing too," said Torquil smiling. His voice changed. "I've no respect for an enforced celibacy—any more than prohibition! It's self-restraint that makes a man, not prison bars." His mouth tightened. "To have, and be able to cast aside." He was silent until they reached the farm.

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CHAPTER IX

WORK! He built it up like a wall between himself and his desire. Yet Josephine's spell persisted. Love crept into the closely-written pages and quickened his inspiration. He knew it to be a better book than anything as yet attempted. It was infinitely more human. In place of the bitter philosophy and detached reason that hitherto had marked his principal character were the warm impulses of youth, its dreams and its perplexities. For the hero was always Torquil and the change was in the man himself.

He yielded to the temptation of reading the finished chapters to Josephine, as the days slipped past, after Kate had departed. No other visitor appeared to break the calm of those quiet evenings. Fortune had played into his hands by sending a serious illness to "Daisy's" mother, detaining the former by the invalid's bedside. He had his lady to himself.

But he kept his secret profoundly guarded, proud of his self-control. Nevertheless, he allowed himself full scope for dangerous thoughts, and he compromised with his conscience when he read aloud to her, not only the author, detached and absorbed, but the hero of his story, face to face with the beloved.

Josephine sometimes wondered at the virile force that deepened his voice as he sat, eyes riveted on the pages of his manuscript. She believed him wrapped up in his work, stirred by it to an emotion untouched in actual life. She did not guess that it had become a safety valve for his passion. She was relieved, too, to find that his idealized conception of her and his careful avoidance of physical

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traits made the portrait of his heroine unrecognizable.

He had slipped so securely into the life at the Villa that his presence there seemed natural, and she was proud of the marked improvement in his health. In her letters to Merriman she dwelt on this and took the credit. She was adamant over the hours for work. Though Torquil fretted, he obeyed her. All this she confided to Richard.

"He's so improved, in every way. Really, a dear fellow. I'm getting very fond of Torquil." She meant it, with no afterthought. "Élise told his fortune last night. She predicts a big success for him, after 'dark days.' Let's hope these are over. I rather fancy she was *glad* when the black cards turned up! She has never really taken to him and is mysterious on the subject. Torquil divines this. It's amusing to watch them together. He's hard at work at his new book. He has read me a part and it's most absorbing. Less cynical than his first novel and he refrains from mounting a pulpit and airing his views on his bugbear—caste! He's not half such a rebel. Les Lecques is broadening his outlook and Kate, unconsciously, helped in this. You should have seen her flirting with him!"

To which Merriman replied: "I'm glad of your news. Don't spoil the boy! Keep him as long as he's amusing and pack him off when you're tired." He had no anxiety on her score, though, sometimes, he envied his author. He could picture his wife in her present rôle, of nurse, critic, and confidante, and was amused at the growing friendship.

His own health had improved of late under medical treatment and he began to count the weeks to the holiday he had promised to take with her in Paris. His business was improving, too. He was bringing out a book of memoirs by a famous diplomatist, long-promised and now in the press. Heron had read a part. Whole-heartedly enthusiastic, he had offered to review it in one of the leading papers. Merriman was looking forward to the stir it would cause in critical circles, enjoying his favorite game of arousing public interest and of pulling private wires. He had also bought

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a fine piece of tapestry, at a private sale where its value was unrecognized in the demand for furniture, and was glorying in his bargain.

Josephine, sitting on the terrace, smiled when she came to this part in his letter.

"He'll be happy for a whole week!" she decided, folding the hurriedly-written page to replace it in its envelope. "I only trust there's no moth in the lining." She glanced up at the sky, conscious that the sun had vanished under a bank of clouds. Beyond the ruined Martello Tower—a relic of some occupation in the constantly changing conquest of these pirate-haunted shores—she could see vertical, silver lines slanting down towards the sea. "It's raining at La Ciotât. I hope Torquil won't get wet."

He had gone for a tramp inland to think out his next day's work, in a sudden fit of restlessness, after their early tea. A cold wind swept over the garden and the palms creaked and groaned before it. A little whirl of dust rose up, full of grit and pine-needles, and a shutter in the house slammed. Josephine rose hurriedly and gathered her papers and work together.

"It's coming," she said, with a glance at the sea, where white horses were rearing their crests on the tumbled waves, and a column of spray flashed up from the broken stones of the pier.

She was running towards the house when she saw Torquil open the gate. He was bare-headed, his hair ruffled, his face glowing with exercise. It struck Josephine suddenly what a handsome man he was, with his dark, clever face, length of limb and supple figure.

He greeted her excitedly, as they met on the upper terrace:

"I *must* tell you——"

"Indoors," she breathed. "There's a storm coming, and one of the shutters is loose upstairs. Élise!" she cried, as she reached the porch.

None too soon, for the rain and wind buffeted Torquil in her wake.

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The dark face of the Brittany maid peered over the banisters.

"Bien, madame!" She vanished quickly to execute her mistress' orders.

Josephine, panting a little, laid down her armful of books in the *salon*, and turned to her impatient guest.

"Now, what is it? How hot you look! Close the window—you'll catch cold."

"I'm all right. *Do* listen!" Aware of her divided attention he obeyed her, frowning, then broke out: "I've seen——" He was incoherent. "I didn't think it possible! Not out of Greece, anyhow."

Josephine laughed. She settled herself on the sofa, prepared to hear his adventure.

"Have you had a glimpse of Diana?"

"Something like it," he retorted. He threw himself into an arm-chair, his long legs thrust out, his hands deep in his pockets. "If you're going to mock, I shan't tell you!"

"Please!" But she still smiled at him, at first with mischief, then with affection. What a child it was! So quickly resentful, so anxious to pour out its news. "I'm listening," she said penitently.

The light came back to his eyes.

"It was up in the hills—the other side of St. Cyr, right away from the main road. I'd climbed a rough sheep track that twisted in and out of the rocks. A bare country. No trees and no vineyards. I was resting on a shelf of sand-stone, thinking out my next chapter when I first heard it—the queerest tune."

He paused and she followed his fanciful vein:

"Panpipes?" Her grey eyes danced.

Torquil nodded triumphantly.

"And then I saw Pan himself." He leaned forward and spoke quickly. "You must try and picture the scene. The rocks and the scorched grass, with the sky nakedly blue above them, the wildest, barest spot—not a sign of human life. Then, suddenly, a dancing figure, burnt to the colour of the sand, bare-legged, in a ragged smock of faded blue,

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with mad, blue eyes. He came skipping round the rocks, a pipe pressed to his shaggy lips; with red hair, long and tangled, to his shoulders over a tattered cloak that had faded from brown to green. As he leaped down, between the stones, he would pause for a moment, play a few notes, and shuffle his feet with a backward glance at a flock of goats that were trailing after. It made me think of the Pied Piper of Hamelin enticing the rats. But that's too civilized. This chap was primitive. Mad, too—I'll swear he was mad! When he caught sight of me he jumped back, as an animal does when surprised, lowered his pipe and pointed at me, one bony hand outstretched. The line of goats, checked behind him, stared, too, with the same air of startled aggression and mistrust. Then the goat-herd shouted something in a queer, high voice and began to laugh. Still laughing, he swerved to the right, running and leaping down the hill, the flock moved by the same panic, and vanished. It was like a dream—the swiftness of it, and the wild laughter. Presently, far away, I heard the music rise again, flute-like and syncopated." Torquil drew a deep breath. "The most wonderful thing I've ever experienced. Why weren't you with me, Josephine?"

In his excitement, her name slipped out. She noticed it, but made no comment. Carried away by his adventure he went on eagerly:

"We must go there to-morrow—the same hour—on the chance of seeing him again. He probably takes the goats down to water them in the stream below. You'll come, won't you? You mustn't miss it. I've been thinking it out on my way home. The car could take you part of the way"—he was frowning, recalling his direction—"but it means a pretty steep climb—rough going over the hills. If it comes to that, I could carry you." He stopped abruptly, aware of Josephine's changed expression, but his blood was stirred. "Why not?" he demanded hotly.

"Don't be absurd, Torquil."

Her quiet voice angered him. He stood up, his face working, clenched his hands and turned away.

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"You've spoilt it all," he said hoarsely.

The rain dashed against the windows and the note of the sea filled the silence. Josephine, utterly at a loss how to act, watched a palm, caught by the wind, invert its shape, its leaves pointed in the air, like the ribs of an umbrella that has turned inside out. She felt strangely powerless. The crisis was so unexpected. Then she heard the door close and realized she was alone.

She drew a deep breath of relief.

What did it mean? Could Torquil—— She thrust the thought away from her. It was not only his mad suggestion but the look on his face as he said it. For his eyes had given his secret away.

Josephine tried to think clearly. Kate had more than once teased her about the "boy's infatuation," but Josephine was the last woman to take such chaff seriously. It was a part of the lazy days and Kate's general indiscretion when her tongue wagged unchecked. Besides, it was Kate who had flirted with Torquil. Between him and herself there had never been anything but friendship. She did not wish it; she shrank from the notion. Even now she might be mistaken. Torquil was always led away by anything that touched his writing, and to-day his adventure had seemed to him the crowning wonder of his visit. Her remark had been an anti-climax. She had checked the flood of his inspiration. If only he hadn't looked like that——

She got up and went to the window. The violet hills had disappeared, veiled by a grey bank of clouds. No place can appear more desolate than the South bereft of its warmth and sunshine. Josephine shivered. How lonely it was! This little Villa, swept by the sea and remote from the Riviera life, with strange faces on every side, speaking a foreign tongue. Only Élise to fall back upon and Josephine could not speak to her of Torquil. An hour ago she had been so happy, secure in his friendship and understanding. Now, everything had changed. She would have to talk to him at dinner under the eyes of the other servants, and Torquil was not a man of the world. Even if she met him

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half-way, he would sulk—she felt sure of it! But there could be no explanation. This she saw clearly. She must overlook the incident. After all, it was very slight. A slip of the tongue and a touch of temper. She must not exaggerate the importance of his words. Nor of his fugitive expression. Here, unconsciously, she winced. It was what lay beneath his mood that troubled her; that threatened to cast a constraint on their intercourse. If only Kate were here now, a third person, to lessen the strain of the daily *tête-à-tête?* Or if David had come for his promised visit. Better by far that the men should quarrel than that Torquil should fall in love with her! David was such a tower of strength. She longed for his presence at this crisis. All day he had been in her mind. Perhaps he was writing to her? She had often been haunted by thoughts of him, to receive a letter next morning.

The waves dashed against the pier and the stream, augmented by the rain that poured down from the watershed of the hills above, had widened, covering the snowy boulders, extending its boundaries with the swiftness that turns an almost dry river-bed into a swollen torrent in a land that revels in sharp contrasts. The air was full of the shrill moan and the distant drumming that marks the mistral, yet the storm came up from the sea and not over the frozen Alps. So loud was its note that Josephine started when she heard the voice of Élise behind her.

"Madame?"

She turned. The door was open. The Brittany maid looked excited. In the dimness beyond, Josephine saw a man's figure, strangely familiar. She gave a gasp of surprise and relief.

"David!" She ran forward to meet him.

"I'm soaking wet, but may I come in?" Heron stood there, apologetic. "I've driven over from Marseilles and the storm caught us half-way. An open car. Talk of the South!" He laughed to cover the joy he felt as his hand clasped hers. "Well, how are you?"

"Bewildered!" There was a catch in her voice. "I'd

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been thinking of you. It's almost uncanny." Her face grew anxious. "You're soaking, David! Where's your luggage? You must change."

"Isn't that like you! I believe the first thing that you'll say to St. Peter, when he shows you one of the 'many mansions,' is, 'Have the mattresses been aired?'" He looked down into her face, his own whimsical and tender. "I haven't brought any luggage. This is a formal call. I'm staying at Marseilles."

"What nonsense!"

He went on, teasing her:

"I've a beautiful room in an old house overlooking the Vieux Port. So big that I take a run before breakfast in and out of the furniture, trying to find a wash-stand that I could hang on my watch-chain! They bring up my water in a cream-jug. I'm only expected to wash my face. I quite welcomed the rain to-day, shook out my feathers in the car like a sparrow in a shower. I saw Richard on Monday and I've brought you endless messages. He promised to keep my journey a secret, and I'm not to interfere with Torquil and ruin the new book! I'm going to be immensely discreet and visit you at intervals."

"You're coming *here*," said Josephine firmly. "Kate's gone and I'm all alone."

"Torquil, too?" He raised his eyebrows.

"No, he's here. But, of course, he's writing."

Something in the way she said it puzzled Heron and he glanced at her curiously.

"I see. A little dull for you. I expect he's absorbed in his work."

"Yes. *Do* stay, David?" She laid a hand on his arm. "I call it most unfriendly! Send back a note to explain and to-morrow we'll drive over and bring your luggage back with us. I can fix you up meanwhile, as Richard left some things behind. I—*want* you to stay." Her eyes pleaded.

"You mean that?" He looked thoughtful. He saw that something was troubling her.

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"I do." She hesitated. "The fact is—— No!" She checked herself.

"Tell me? You've fallen out with Torquil?"

Her grey eyes came back to his face, astonished, and candid as a child's. "Bless her," he said in his heart. "I wonder what that young devil's been up to?" She was speaking.

"How did you guess? It's nothing much—a misunderstanding—but I was dreading dinner to-night." She added loyally, "It was partly my own fault."

"I doubt it." Heron smiled gravely. "So I'm to play the heavy parent and help you two to kiss and be friends?" He made a wry face, then laughed. "I'd far sooner smack Torquil. I suppose he's a little too old for that?"

"He's growing up." The humour of the remark struck Josephine suddenly and she laughed. "But he's really been good. And he's much stronger—a different man."

"And less saintly in consequence?" Heron's blue eyes twinkled. "All right. I'll stand by. If you can give me a sheet of paper I'll write that letter for the chauffeur."

She left him to his task and sought Élise, who was openly delighted at the turn of affairs and already preparing Heron's room. As she came back past Torquil's door, Josephine paused. Now was the moment for smoothing the way for a cheerful dinner. Heron's presence had lifted the burden of her doubts and perplexities.

"You writing?" she called.

There came no reply. She was moving away when the door opened, and Torquil appeared.

"Is that you, Mrs. Merriman?" His face looked haggard against the light of a lamp inside, from which the shade had been removed. His hand still clutched his pen.

"Not over-working?" she asked gently.

"No." He seemed tongue-tied. His dark eyes studied her with a brooding melancholy.

"I just wanted to tell you," she said, "that Mr. Heron has arrived—unexpectedly—from Marseilles. So we shall

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be three to dinner." She smiled. "You and he can 'talk shop.'"

"Heron! To *stay?*" His voice was strained.

She nodded her head. A sudden pity seized her, for Torquil looked wretched.

"It won't interfere with the book. I shall insist on hearing that. I'm getting so interested. You must bring in the mad shepherd." She was determined to show him that she had forgotten the incident. She was moving away when Torquil checked her, a hand thrust out, then quickly withdrawn.

"Forgive me," he said under his breath.

Before she could answer, Heron appeared at the end of the corridor and called to her:

"Mrs. Merriman?"

Torquil was drawing back.

"Come and greet him," said Josephine quickly, thankful for the interruption.

Torquil hesitated, then followed her. He was thinking hard. Heron—of all people! There was only one way out of it. He was not going to be the butt of his fellow-author's witticisms. Bitterness flooded him, but he managed to look unconcerned.

"How are you?" He shook hands, drawn up to his full height, sourly pleased to realize that he had the advantage of inches.

Heron responded gravely and repressed a rising sense of humour. He was so acutely conscious of Josephine in the background urging him to be "good!"

"I've not brought the best of weather," he suggested to fill the pause that followed.

"No." Torquil saw his chance. "I suppose I shall find it like this when I get back to England next week." He was aware of Josephine's start. So was Heron and inwardly furious. Damn the chap! With his touchy pride! To wound the sweetest woman on earth. His jaw set, watching Torquil, who went on steadily: "Still, I've had a lovely holiday, and it's time I knuckled down to work. It's

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not so easy in lotus-land." How it hurt, to quote the words in Josephine's generous letter. He was lashing himself purposely. He called it "getting back his control." But he left her feelings out of the case.

"I can understand that," said Heron. "One wants to be out all day long." He turned to Josephine, anxious to shorten the scene. "I'll just give this to the driver." He was off, the note in his hand.

Josephine looked at Torquil.

"Did you mean what you said just now?"

"Yes. You'll have Mr. Heron, and—and I've stayed long enough." He brought it out with an effort. "I've been thinking of moving on. I can't tell you what I feel. I'm not ungrateful—believe that. I've never known such kindness. You—you——" He broke down.

"I'm sorry." The words rose from her heart. "But we won't talk of it to-night. I think these storms upset one's nerves. You musn't settle anything yet. It's too cold for you in England."

"It's better for me." He looked away. "If you think that, I could go to Arles. I'd like to see more of Provence. Though nothing can come up to Les Lecques." A sudden superstition seized him. He tried to smile but his lips quivered. "That's what the music meant to-day. It's fatal to hear the pipes of Pan."

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CHAPTER X

BY the time Torquil reached Tarascon, he was almost resigned to his fate. A hopeless attachment has one advantage; the victim's personal liberty and prospects remain unimpaired. He can dream despairingly of his lady but without a thought, for instance, of the cost of furniture. He can also find great pride in his own self-control, if it has remained unshaken. Torquil's imagination played round his perilous plight—a married woman, his publisher's wife—and saw, in his prudence, renunciation. His retreat was victory, not flight.

Had Josephine guessed, he wondered?

In her face, as the train puffed out of the station, he had discerned a tender regret, the stars in her eyes veiled. He did not realize that she was both sorry and relieved from a burden of innocent guilt and the constant fear that Heron might wound Torquil's vanity.

His last five days at Les Lecques had been ruined by the former's presence. His irritating cheerfulness was an offence to a man in love. It left him little chance for brooding. At Arles, his first halting-place, he gave himself up to his despair and was curiously disconcerted to find that the mood began to pall. He resolved to drown his sorrows in work, forgetting the pair left behind. He hated his fellow-author, but the comforting reflection followed that Heron could not have her either! Meanwhile there was Provence, with its ancient lore, at his feet—"copy" to burn! Notebook in hand, he scoured the surrounding country and, although he would not admit it, enjoyed himself exceedingly. And at Tarascon, he made friends.

In the clean, quiet little hotel he found two English-

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women, a mother and daughter, the latter bored to open revolt by her surroundings. She promptly made advances to Torquil in a company hitherto confined to a pair of *commis voyageurs,* a resigned Belgian family, and a French colonel, minus one leg, with a bias against the government.

She introduced herself to Torquil with a request for a match, one night, in the dark little smoking-room where she sprawled, defiantly puffing away at a cigarette in a long holder, the French colonel glaring at her. Her name was Nan Considine, and Tarascon was a poisonous hole, wasn't it? After Cannes! Nothing to see and nothing to buy, though that was perhaps lucky, as the shops in the Riviera had cleaned her out—dead broke! They were here to economize. "Mum" had a mania for God-forsaken little places full of pre-historic churches—whilst every one was *dancing* in London! Tarascon was the limit. Oh, of course, it was full of ruins and legends and all that. No use to her—she'd prefer a casino! Beaucaire? Yes, she'd been there, but if Torquil dared to mention Aucassin and Nicolette it would be the last straw. And he'd better be careful before Mum—she thought them an improper couple! Courts of Love, cheeri-oh! It was André Boileau's fault—did Torquil know Boileau? A top-hole painter, but a bore. He'd lent Mum a book at Cannes, all about the troubadours. A heady lot, weren't they? And Mum always muddled things. Wouldn't have done for her to go to France with the W.A.A.C.'s. Yes. Nan had been there, worked through the war at a camp near Arras. Ripping! She missed it now. "So damned narrow, everybody."

All this with disarming candour in a clear, well-bred voice. She reminded Torquil of a boy. There was nothing feminine about her, except the suppressed wealth of her hair, bound tightly round her well-shaped head but allowed to escape in a flat curl on either sunburnt, youthful cheek. These, and her wrinkleless silk stockings, seemed her only vanities.

A type of the modern, sexless girl, he decided. She

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might be useful for "copy." Certainly not dangerous to Torquil, proof against temptation, with Josephine enshrined in his heart. He was merely interested, a little disgusted, and critical. Amazing how unconscious she seemed of the scantiness of her skirt! After the cigarette, she powdered her nose, still talking, and slipped the puff in its silk sheath down the front of her blouse giving it a little pat to flatten it on her girlish bosom. Torquil made a note of this.

He allowed himself to be introduced to her mother early next morning in the courtyard of the hotel, inwardly taken aback when he found that she possessed a title.

Lady Mary Considine was a thin, aristocratic lady with a long, sad face of the equine type, a long, flat back and beautiful hands. Wherever she happened to be, she had the appearance of having strayed there by accident, too helpless to extricate herself. She belonged to an old and impoverished Roman Catholic family, was immensely devout and absent-minded. A wag had once said of her that in her anxiety to find a short cut to Paradise, she steadily overlooked the fact that most of her numerous offspring were heading the other way! Her sallow face was redeemed by a pair of beautiful brown eyes that at moments looked sightless, their gaze turned inwards to search her own devout soul. Her name was to be found on every charitable programme, and she lived in an atmosphere of committee meetings and Requiem Masses.

It occurred to Torquil that she accepted him with the absent-minded benevolence she would have extended had Nan brought home a stray kitten. But she didn't attempt to inquire his breed. She belonged to a class, so secure in its ringed circle, knit together by the bond of an ancient faith, that people outside did not count. An Englishman—presumably—and an author, with quite passable manners, he would amuse Nan, and give Lady Mary the leisure she loved, to drift in and out of churches, unaware of their architecture but conscious of centuries of worship. These were democratic times and Nan had been very trying. A good-looking boy. Her beautiful eyes ran over his stalwart

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frame, and his lean, rather austere face. He reminded her pleasantly of a St. Sebastian she had admired in the Louvre. She listened with a far-away air whilst Torquil, prompted by Nan, explained that he had come from Les Lecques, where he had been staying, "With the Merrimans at their villa. He's my publisher."

Lady Mary nodded gently.

"I've met him. He's bringing out a book by a cousin of mine. Memoirs, I think? He stayed for a week-end at Ardesley Castle when we were there. A pleasant man—understands old furniture. . . . No, I don't know his wife." With this she began to drift away from the space before the inn.

Nan, with a gesture, checked Torquil.

"That's all right—she doesn't want us. Now, what shall we do?"

Torquil suggested a visit to the château of King Réné, but Nan made a face at him.

"You come with me! I've found a place where we can bathe in the river. But don't tell Mum."

It seemed to Torquil that this refrain rang at the end of most of her speeches.

They bathed. They also drank French beer outside a sinister-looking café where workmen congregated, but conveniently far from their hotel.

"Fun, isn't it?" said Nan. "Can you play dominoes?"

Torquil shook his head.

"I'll teach you." Undeterred by his obvious reluctance, she called to the waiter and gave an order in fluent French.

This worthy unearthed a greasy box overflowing with yellowish pieces. She rattled them out on the marble table and divided them into two piles.

"We won't play for money at first," she said to Torquil cheerfully. "Not till you've got the lie of the land. It's jolly here in the sunshine. I'm glad you've come. You've no idea how awful it's been for me, penned up in that hotel with nobody to speak to. And Mum retires to bed at ten. To-night we'll go round the town, after I've tucked her up.

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This game's called *Numéro Cinq*. I learnt it from a wounded *pioupiou* in a cellar during an air-raid. You were in the war?"

"For three years."

"I thought so! You walk like it."

"How?" He was curious.

She gave him a wicked glance and sprang to her feet. One by one the workmen had slouched off; only an old man remained, spelling out the news in a soiled copy of *Le Gaulois*.

"I'll show you. But remember it's my next move. I've just put down double-five."

She squared her shoulders and adjusted the belt above her supple hips, then swaggered past him down the pavement. She had caught Torquil's unconscious habit of throwing his head up and back, with the aggressive thrust of his chin and the sway of his lean body. Naturally she overdid it. He was furious but hid the fact.

"Bravo!" He smiled at her as she made her way back to the table.

She studied his face for a moment.

"You're a sport. I knew it!"

Her frank approval soothed his wounded vanity, yet his resentment lingered. He would pay her back some day.

Luckily, he won the game. She accepted defeat cheerfully and glanced at the clock inside the café.

"Nearly lunch-time! We must scoot. Don't give the waiter more than tuppence. It'll spoil him and we'll come here again."

Torquil approved this. He was very careful with his money. A sudden picture flashed across him of a day spent in Marseilles, with Josephine—at her expense. For a moment, he felt uneasy. Then he remembered that it was his publisher who had really paid. "And he gets plenty out of his authors," Torquil privately decided.

He settled up for the two *bocks* and followed Nan, his mind elsewhere. He could see himself again at the well-appointed restaurant, tasting his first *bouillabaisse*, whilst

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Josephine watched him, amused at his distrust of the soaked bread floating in its saffron broth. Beyond, in the grilling Cannebière, the swarthy, full-blooded men issued, to gather in noisy knots, from the vast temple-like Bourse; and the pageant of Marseilles, with its Turcos, Spahis and Greek Lascars; its voluptuous black-haired women, its flowers, dust, sweat and noise, swept onward unceasingly and was spiced by the salt tang of the sea.

"A penny?"

Nan was watching his face.

Torquil started.

"For my thoughts? I was thinking of Les Lecques."

"You looked jolly sentimental." She laughed as he gave her a quick glance that had a touch of fear in it. "A case of the girl you left behind you?"

"Good Lord, no!" said Torquil. It seemed to him a profanation that she should speak of Josephine.

They made their way through crooked bye-ways into an open *place* where an old church frowned down on them.

"There's Mum!" Nan twisted round. "You go on—we'll meet at lunch. No good tellin' her we've been together all the morning. Stick to your story—I'll stick to mine—if she questions us. So long!" She vanished into a stationer's shop.

Torquil strode on, disgusted. He resented being made an accomplice in Nan's attempts to deceive her parent. There was something about Lady Mary that roused a feeling of reluctant admiration. Aloof she might be, but it was no pose, any more than the abstraction of an author wrapped up in his work. Meet Nan at lunch? Torquil frowned, resenting the monopoly that threatened to interfere with his freedom. An engraving in a shop window of the castle at Beaucaire caught his eye and decided him. He branched off towards the station.

All that golden afternoon he lay under the castle walls, eyes half-closed, wrapped in dreams. Below him, the blue Rhône swirled past with its eddies and powerful currents. There was purpose in the force of the water that had left

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its impress on the land and, care-free, sought the open sea. Nothing could divert its course. Man might bridge it; the mighty river laughed at the buttressed stone.

Torquil, hypnotized by its movement, compared it to himself. His resolution was hardening. Upon the flood of his ambitions, Josephine was like a branch that had snapped from a flowering almond-tree to lie for a moment on the surface, delicate and alive with Spring, till the ruthless stream swept it aside. Nothing should obscure his vision or check the purpose of his life. He registered his vows anew.

Appeased, he let his mind slip back to the romance of Beaucaire, its *ballade* of love and chivalry. He was haunted by the walls above him.

The sun, in a great, gold ball slid slowly to the distant ridge of the Alpines, and the woods darkened.

There Nicolette was building her bower of leaves entwined with snowy blossoms, the "brown bird" singing overhead, whilst the shepherd, dazed by the vision—no longer shaken by mad laughter like the ragged figures above St. Cyr—sped forth with her summons. She would be listening, her eyes wistful, for Aucassin as twilight deepened. There would be stars in her eyes. . . . Torquil sighed and stirred on the bank.

Presently, bent low on his charger, Count Garin's son would come riding, thorns and briars whipping him, till forty wounds dripped blood, mourning for his *douce mie*. And his face was the face of Torquil. . . .

Dreams! But dreams were not forbidden. They were the warp and woof of stories, Love the needle that plied between them, embroidering the tapestry.

He stayed there until darkness fell, then said farewell to the gaunt old tower and the broken wall that had withstood a thirteenth-century assault when Simon de Montfort held the Castle against the hosts of his enemy, Raymond VII of Toulouse.

As he wandered down the hill, pondering on wars old

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and new, Torquil remembered that poison gas was no new invention. The guide-book which he carried quoted that in this siege "they of the Capitol . . . sew together in a cloth, fire and sulphur and tow; and when the fire has taken, and the sulphur melts, the flames and the stench so choke the foe that not one of them can longer remain there." But the end is defeat, after a sortie, and Simon de Montfort "disarms himself under an olive tree and his damsels and his squires take away his armour."

"Damsels?" Torquil smiled, his mind reverting to Nan. She would have made a good page, unfastening his buckler, bathing his forehead, and whilst the stricken man recovered —he chuckled—she would have used his shield as a mirror, to powder her freckled nose!

These were the girls men married! Thank God he was free, safe-guarded from fleshly assaults. For Josephine would protect him; the memory of what might have been.

Still, Nan could have her uses. Not only as a new type but to introduce his work, in her wide and influential circle. She had promised as much that morning.

"Let me know when your book comes out and I'll *make* people buy it!"

He was not going to lose any chance Fortune might throw in his way. He would be her playmate for a week. He wondered if she had noticed his absence. Unused to her sex, he did not guess that it had been a clever move on his part to upset her calculations. Nan missed him, was aggrieved, and inwardly approved his conduct. He was not altogether docile.

At dinner she welcomed him demurely under her mother's austere eyes, whispered a word to the latter at the close of the meal and beckoned Torquil to their table.

"Come and have coffee with us?"

It was a public recognition and Torquil's spirits rose. He was perfectly aware that the mother had little part in it, but this did not trouble him.

Lady Mary, her hand forced, smiled occasionally at him

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and acquiesced in all he said; but again he had the sensation of being miles away from her, out of the focus of her eyes whilst she withdrew mentally. Once the girl tried to recover her parent's wandering attention.

"I heard from Fiammetta this morning. She's off to Cologne to be near Jinks—wangled it through General Talbot. And, oh, I forgot to tell you! Audrey's engaged to the Puffin!"

Lady Mary came down from the clouds.

"To whom?"

"The Puffin." Nan laughed. "You know—Sir Thomas Letts. I expect he said, 'Let's do it!' Fiammetta christened him 'the Puffin.'" She turned to Torquil, her eyes dancing. "He made a fortune in guava—no, guano, isn't it? And he's exactly like the bird. Perches, in a rounded waistcoat, with his feet turned out."

All that Lady Mary said was:

"Letts? I don't remember him." That seemed to dispose of the merchant. She rose, smiled vaguely at Torquil and drifted away, gently unconscious of the interest she evoked among the Belgian family, who had learnt that she was an earl's daughter.

Nan waited until the head waiter had bowed her parent from the room, then she ordered a liqueur, and lit one of Torquil's cigarettes.

"Can you play billiards?" she asked him. "It's a rotten table—French, of course, with no pockets—but I vote we commandeer it. It's in a room at the back of the house. Mum won't hear the balls."

"I'm no good at it," said Torquil.

"That's all right—I'll teach you. As soon as I know Mum's upstairs, I'll play a waltz on that cracked piano in the *salon*—to mark my whereabouts! The Belgian girls will take it over. They always resent my attempts. As a matter of fact they play damn well! Then I'll escape and meet you." She emptied her glass and stood up. "Keep the commercial travellers at bay. They'll sneak the table

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unless you watch. Tip the marker and say you've engaged it. Oh, and just settle up for this." She touched the rim of the glass. "I left my bag upstairs. We'll square accounts later on." She was off, with a gay nod.

Torquil, deeply mistrustful, paid.

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PART II

THE FLAME

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CHAPTER XI

LONDON—awakening from the fogs, with a start, to realize the Spring; with lilacs struggling into bloom in the sooty square gardens and an epidemic of house-painting and roads torn up by the roots.

Torquil, on his return, had found a bed-sitting-room in Chelsea. His windows—it boasted two, looked down from the second floor on to the lawns of a tennis-club that filled the long railed strip between the old-fashioned houses, and was bordered on the north by the Consumption Hospital. His side of the square was a *cul-de-sac* where the traffic was stopped in a casual fashion by a bar placed across the road. Beyond this was a Polytechnic and a Free Library.

It seemed an ideal retreat to the author, airy and full of light, and save for the distant hum of traffic in Fulham Road, curiously silent; so still at times that he could hear a steam crane intermittently at work on the river bank, with its whining note that rose and swelled, sank and died away again. Writing at his open window, with the green turf of the garden below and the wide bowl of the sky before him untrammeled by the low buildings, he would listen to the slurred vibration and imagine himself in the country, where golden corn was being thrashed.

For the first time since he came to London he had found a pleasant landlady and a scrupulously clean house. There was only one other lodger, whom he carefully avoided, an Indian medical student who had taken the room under his, was quiet—almost too quiet—and painfully anxious to be friendly. With his noiseless step, Mr. Narandur would materialize on the staircase when Torquil made a bolt from the bath-room and murmur apologetically that he was

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"onlee waiting to gett" warm water, with a swift comment on the weather to encourage conversation.

"Such a *nice* young gentleman," the landlady told Torquil, "gave no trouble, so anxious to help."

Too anxious, her listener decided. Torquil kept clear of Narandur, mindful of a dusky contingent at Cambridge whom Lyddon was wont to refer to contemptuously as "Those niggers at Jesus." Lyddon, the man he had loved, now Lord Talgarth, who had extended the palm of friendship to Torquil and, then, had delicately withdrawn it. Even a quarrel would have been better than the courteous nod and studied evasion replacing their long, fervid talks when they altered the world to meet their ideals. The wound still rankled in Torquil's soul. He had "no use for society." But the thought followed that, in turn, he might spoil the Philistines, turn the class he despised into a lever for his success.

Nan had put this into his head. Anything could be "wangled" now, provided you pulled the right strings. She professed an interest in literature so long as it wasn't "soppy." Her arguments left Torquil with the net impression that even "style" would be forgiven if the story proved "a bit thick." She had been intensely curious to probe beneath his pseudonym. It would be a score, she decided, to know Torquil's real name, and to withhold it from every one—this mysterious and handsome young author. In vain she laid traps for him, with artless questions regarding his "county," his acquaintances and manner of life. Torquil was more than her match. But it added a zest to their sudden friendship in sleepy Tarascon, and kept it alive when they parted. Nan, who had frankly used Torquil as a refuge from her boredom, but for this and one other fact would probably have allowed him to slip from her memory on her return. The mystery tantalized her. Who was he? Where did he come from?

She found, too, a singular dearth of unemployed young men in town. Gone were the days of soldiers on leave or recovering from minor wounds, anxious for "a good time."

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Every one was getting to work. In the evenings it was easier, but for afternoon purposes it was extremely difficult to whip up a cavalier who was neither grey-haired nor a cripple. She sat down and wrote to Torquil, care of his publisher. Where was he? What was he doing? They were "always at home on Sundays."

Torquil, absorbed in his book, left the letter unanswered, then decided one sunny Sabbath to risk this new social departure. He was rather scared by Lady Mary. Nervously he rang the bell of the gloomy house in Chesham Street—to learn that the family was "out!"

He returned, furious, to his rooms. It had cost him a new tie. Just like Society! Took a fellow up and dropped him. "Out"? They had probably watched his retreat, and he hadn't even a card to leave. A pseudonym had its disadvantages. He stamped up the stairs to his room and tore off the offending tie.

But next day he heard from Nan. "Sorry," they'd "gone to Ranelagh" and would Torquil come to lunch "on Thursday at two o'clock?" The hour was erased and over it "one, sharp," scrawled hurriedly.

He accepted the olive branch. He told himself that he did so on account of his work, but deep down in his heart he exulted, his personal vanity soothed. Not good enough for Lyddon, yet the Considines entertained him! Here was a greater triumph than his visit to Les Lecques. Josephine had admitted him to her friendship, but there was Merriman, the astute publisher, hovering in the background. Besides, the owners of Westwick Place, important in literary circles, were not on the same social plane as Lady Mary, Torquil decided. He even insisted on this, with a semi-conscious grudge against a publisher who refused to accept an author on his own valuation but judged him by results, and whose undoubted kindness held the shadow of patronage.

This was when he classed them together. Taken individually, Josephine stood apart. There was no one to equal her, the lady of his dreams and despair. She was con-

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tinually in his mind. Yet, somehow, it was easier to love her at a distance. He found a poignant consolation in the book he was steadily building round her. Out of the pages, her radiant eyes met his, unashamed before the eloquence of her lover. He tasted spurious joys of possession, exempt from the morbid fear that the thought of passion roused in him. Although, at times, he longed for her presence, he dreaded a subtle disillusion. She was so perfect in his book, re-created by his fancy, so proud of Torquil, so utterly his. But in the flesh she was Merriman's wife. There were moments when he would tell himself that Les Lecques had been a golden dream, leaving behind it trailing clouds of beauty and experience, yet evanescent as its sunsets. Work was the only reality. And Success—he drew a deep breath and heard in the silence the purring note of the steam crane on the river, swinging its burden above the bank, the evidence of man's brain saving man inhuman labour. In a flash he saw before him the broken backs of the slaves who had built the Pyramids, dying under the scourge of the whip. If God were responsible for Creation, He had left it to Man to evolve mercy. Through the initial revolution—when the creature disobeyed his Maker—brains had superseded blind faith. Man was now the creator. It was to Man that Torquil turned.

And to Woman? He smiled as he read again Nan's hurried invitation. Where and what was Ranelagh? The name seemed vaguely familiar. As he went downstairs to post his reply in the letter-box at the corner, a dark form slipped from a doorway.

"Good-a morning," said Narandur.

Unpleasant, the flash of those white teeth in the dusky, pitted face! Yet Torquil hesitated. One of the Indian student's gifts was topographical accuracy. He knew London as few Cockneys know the city of which they boast. Torquil risked an inquiry regarding Ranelagh. Narandur was enchanted. He overflowed with information, an authority on polo, one of the "sports of my coun-tree." A

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first-class club—most select—and so forth. Torquil listened, then cut him short:

"Thanks. By a Barnes Common bus, over Putney Bridge. That's all I wanted." He escaped from the whining voice, the sweet, sickly odour of cloves and almond oil that hung in the narrow passage.

"And uses the same bath-room," he thought with a shiver, as he reached the pavement. If only he had a place of his own where he could reign, supreme master. Suddenly before his eyes there rose the picture of a house, peering across Park Lane; a half-forgotten memory, the Mecca of his early dreams. The little house; a great author. . . .

It would come. He filled his lungs with the air crisp and alive with dancing motes, golden in the spring sunshine. That morning the first copy of his new book had reached him. An ecstatic moment as he dipped into favourite passages and admired his name on the cover. "Torquil"—in gilt—how well it looked! Another step on the high ladder reaching up to the stars. He must give one to Nan and sign it. She would show it to her friends. He would take it with him on Thursday.

He did. On the fly-leaf was written:

"From Torquil—remembering Tarascon."

The inscription pleased him with its blend of reserve, suggestion and euphony. A mere touch of alliteration could be tolerated, he decided. As a habit it was detestable. But all this would be lost on Nan. Josephine would have understood.

The book under his left arm, he followed the butler up the stairs of the gloomy Chesham Street house and was shown into a double drawing-room with windows at either end.

His first impression was of chairs. They sprouted like mushrooms from a carpet not over-clean and, in places, threadbare; chairs of every shape and description muffled in faded cretonne (save a spindle-legged contingent) breath-

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ing of heavy forms, entrenched at committee meetings. Avoiding this sheep-pen, a pair of youths stood talking in the back room by the tightly-closed window. They glanced up as Torquil entered and went on with their conversation. At an escritoire in the opposite corner a girl was writing feverishly, her veil thrown back from her hat, a fur slipping from her shoulders. She darted a quick look at the guest, picked up an envelope, scrawled an address across it and dropping the letter on the floor, immediately began another.

Torquil, painfully self-conscious, decided to efface himself on the sofa. As he sat down, the worn springs protested loudly, and added to his discomfiture. He felt ruffled by his reception, and confused by his surroundings, so different from his expectations.

This, Lady Mary's house? So shabby, with its dirty windows under the worn brocade hangings suggesting a home for moth and dust. The house of an earl's daughter —within a stone's throw of Belgrave Square! Half-guiltily he looked about him and his troubled eyes found peace in a painting over the mantelpiece. A portrait, with the shimmering satin beloved of the old masters: a face wrapped in silent ecstasy of pride and knowledge of its power, the liquid eyes bent on Torquil, demanding homage, a tapering hand reaching up to the pearls that glided over the sloping shoulders.

It stirred his imagination. For the eyes were those of Lady Mary, mystic, aloof, yet passionate. In place of the latter's fanaticism was a love for the pleasures of this world, a twist of the same temperament that rushed wilfully to extremes. Torquil, engrossed in the mellowed oils, caught a phrase of the conversation in the window beyond and smiled to himself.

"All right. But don't tell Mum!"

The door opened and in burst Nan, dressed in some flimsy blue material, her neat head wedged into a hat that acted as an extinguisher.

"Hullo, Torquil! Come on—we've only just time to get lunch." She caught at his hand and dragged him with

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her. "Mum's out—'Infant Welfare.' She won't be back until two, so we're having a snack early—just you and me." She turned her head on the stairs as one of the youths, who had followed them, called down over the banisters:

"I say, Nan, have you any change?"

"Not I!" said Miss Considine. "You two met? This is Billy, my youngest brother—Torquil, the author."

"How're you?" said Billy kindly. "Look here, Nan, haven't you even half a crown? I'm calling for Tiny. I meant to cash a cheque at the club but I forgot. You really *must* lend me something?"

But Nan, with a shake of her head, went on.

"Damn!" said Billy and withdrew.

"An extraordinary family," thought Torquil.

Miss Considine's next remark filled him with uneasiness. "Glad you didn't rise to it! Billy's hopeless over money."

"I d-didn't like to," stammered Torquil. The idea was entirely foreign to him. He thrust out his book to her as they sat down at the long table. "I've brought you this—if you care to read it?"

"Rather!" She took it eagerly and opened it. "Signed, too! You *are* a lamb."

He was saved. His spirits revived as he helped himself to some curdled sauce presented by the solemn butler. It was symptomatic of the lunch. Nan excused it airily:

"A rotten cook—goes to-morrow. Third we've had since our return. Never mind. Cheeri-oh, Torquil! We'll get some fizz at the wedding."

"The wedding?" He looked up, surprised.

"Yes, that's why I'm rushing you. I *must* see Audrey married. To the Puffin, y'know. I'm hoping he'll wear a white waistcoat. That would make him the perfect bird." She glanced at the clock. "Brompton Oratory—at two. We'll do it—in a taxi. Now, tell me all your news?"

He accepted the plan helplessly, but foreseeing that he would pay for the taxi! The modern maiden might dispense with chivalry, but she took it out in hard cash, was his cynical conclusion.

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Nan, blissfully unaware of his secret rebellion, prattled on up to the very moment when they alighted at the door of the great domed church.

It was the first time that Torquil had been in a place of worship since the days of "chapel" at Cambridge, and it seemed to him like some grim jest. To be there, utterly unbelieving, packed close in a crowd of devout Catholics of whose status he had no doubt—a member of that "society" he so bitterly anathematized!

It would make an excellent scene in a book. The thought acted as a tonic. Yet he could not shake off a queer oppression. Those rows of rustling well-dressed people, smiling and nodding at one another, yet pausing gravely to bend the knee before they entered the packed pews. Above all the glitter and pretence of this marriage for money, made on earth, the fine old church, with its silvery marble, extended a hand in benediction. Life passed, but religion remained: God on His throne, pitiful, just, aware of the weakness of his creatures. This was the silent sermon preached by the exquisite light that seemed to hang like a mystic cloud in the dome.

Torquil resisted the impression with all his strength, his jaw set, reason at war with superstition. He shook himself free from a feeling of awe and reluctant reverence. All this might be valuable. He became once more the recorder, and his old cynicism returned when a portly person like a beadle proceeded to spread out the train of the kneeling bride for the benefit of the congregation counting the loops of costly lace. He was like a ghost from Dickens, as he ambled over the red carpet and withdrew after a furtive touch to straighten one of the velvet chairs in the crescent sacred to the bridesmaids, the priest intoning solemnly. What a comedy, thought Torquil!

At last it was over. The bride had passed like an arum lily, sheathed, aloof, the Puffin grotesque and beaming beside her, his flat feet in their patent boots turned out as Nan had prophesied. It was a wickedly true description.

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Bird-like, he hopped into the carriage holding the big white bouquet.

Torquil and his companion were swept through the porch in the crush.

"This way!" Nan seized his arm. "Here's a taxi!" They got in. "Hyde Park Hotel," she cried to the driver. Pulling out her powder-puff she gazed earnestly in the glass facing them and smothered her nose. "Looked nice, didn't she? But I'm simply dying for a drink. That's why I didn't waste time talkin'. We'll get it now in peace before all the crowd turns up. There go the pages! Aren't they *lambs?*"

The taxi stopped. Torquil paid. "And that ends it," he decided. He followed Nan up the wide staircase, interested yet repelled. The bride's still face haunted him. He saw her the sport of the Fates, her youth bartered for man's passion. In Nan's wake he shook hands with her, then with the Puffin, and noted his loose lips, the moisture on his narrow forehead. The bride's fingers were deadly cold. She smiled faintly as Nan chaffed her. Fluttering about her, like spring leaves under the great white bell of flowers, were the bridesmaids in their pale green dresses, wreathed in myrtle, with golden veils, virginal and provocative. Torquil looked at them wonderingly. Were they curious over the sacrifice, these laughter-loving friends of hers? Love profaned for the lust of gold.

He had found Nan her champagne, drunk a glass himself and moved away from the buffet when a sudden flood of guests surged up and divided them. He escaped to a quiet corner beyond the band and far from the bride. Nan, surrounded by friends, could take care of herself and he felt the relief of being alone with his own thoughts. Above the rustle and the chatter, the music broke forth again into the latest two-step. A man beside him began to shuffle his feet, caught by the pattering tune. Well-groomed, with merry eyes and full of youthful vitality, his appearance appealed to Torquil. He watched him take a couple of

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steps forward surreptitiously, then back again to the wall. He was obviously aching to dance. Suddenly his face lit up; he held out his hands and cried:

"Come on! I'll dare you to take a turn!"

"Why not?" A clear, laughing voice sounded behind Torquil.

He turned. In a moment he recognized her. The beautiful, arrogant little face under its vivid copper hair, the slender body, sheathed in dove-grey, the fine feet in their suède slippers and—yes! there were the scarlet heels. The "lady of the gondola," linked to him indissolubly by the night that had witnessed his first success, the letter hinting at terms for his book.

He could not remove his eyes from her. He stared unashamedly as, already held by her partner, she glanced back over her shoulder.

"Is there room?" Her poised brows drew together. For a stout, elderly gentleman had drifted into the quiet corner and was standing solidly in the centre, his back turned to the couple. Her eyes caught Torquil's intent gaze. For a moment she looked puzzled. Did she, too, remember, he wondered? Then, with a mischievous smile, her lips parted; she whispered, "Move him."

Torquil was stirred absurdly by a sense of her confidence in himself. All his shyness fell away. Authoritative but courteous, he tapped the elderly gentleman on the arm.

"Please? A little further back," he murmured and pointed to the dancers.

It had the desired effect. Now the young couple could move at ease. Torquil watched their fantastic steps in a dream, all his senses held by the supple swaying figure, the glimpse he could catch of a petal-like cheek under the black sweep of her hat. He stood there, like a man possessed, flattened against the wall, the blood throbbing in his temples. Even then, subconsciously, he realized that the dance was a serious affair to them both, a trial of skill, almost a rite. Not a word passed between them. The joyous young man looked grave; the girl's white lids were lowered over her

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aquamarine eyes, her red lips pressed together. It amazed and enchanted Torquil.

He became aware suddenly that the bandsmen were equally involved, their eyes following the couple, the beat of the music accentuated, and that a crowd of wedding guests had gathered, amused, to watch this departure, the dancers conscious of the fact. Torquil recognized this by the glances the young man cast right and left, humorous yet deprecating. But the girl was utterly unmoved. Her sublime assurance awoke in Torquil an answering chord. Here was success. Individual, she towered above all those lightly critical women, utterly careless of their opinion.

Suddenly the music stopped and, at this signal, the spell was snapped. The amused spectators surged forward and the girl was surrounded by laughing friends. Torquil heard a man say, "The best dancer in London," to a woman eager for information. "Professional? Good Lord, no!" Then Nan's mischievous, brown face from under the extinguisher hat bobbed up, searching his own.

"I lost you! I might have guessed you'd be watching Fiammetta. Isn't she wonderful?"

"'Fiammetta'?" It seemed strangely familiar, to bring an echo from the past. "What is her other name?"

"Lyddon."

She saw him recoil. His startled face grew dark with anger. She stared, amazed at the transformation, as he asked, with an effort:

"Any relation to Lord Talgarth?"

"His sister, of course. Here she comes! I'll introduce you."

"*No!*" said Torquil.

He had not troubled to lower his voice. It rang out roughly. He did not care. His disillusion was complete. Miserable yet impenitent, he was aware of the amazement on the beautiful, arrogant, little face and of Nan, speechless, with pursed lips. Then the crisis was on him.

"I've been looking for you." Fiammetta laid her hand on Nan's arm. "And here you are—with——?" Her eyes

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were turned full on Torquil. A faint smile curved her beautiful mouth, of mischief and disdain combined. Nan murmured something quickly. Fiammetta's smile widened. "I must thank you"—she addressed Torquil—"for removing Lord Routh just now. I don't think I caught your name?"

"Torquil." It sounded like a challenge.

Into the aquamarine eyes came a sudden flash of interest.

"The author of *An Outsider?* I've read it. A clever book." She turned to Nan. "Bring him to see me," and passed on, assured, surrounded, with a last glint of scarlet heels.

Torquil's martyrdom began.

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CHAPTER XII

MERCIFULLY for Torquil, Nan belonged to a class that expects eccentricity in its authors and its artists. She put down his strange behaviour to this, or to a sudden attack of shyness. What puzzled her was Fiammetta's graciousness.

"You're in luck," she told Torquil. "She's rather particular. I mean," she added hastily, "she doesn't invite *every* one. But she likes people who *do* things. She's so damned clever herself! Writes the music for her dances—invents them, too, designs the frocks and even paints the scenery—rides, fences, everything! There's no one to touch her. And generous—— I've known her give away a brand-new frock, never worn, to a girl who was hard up. Of course she's jolly rich, but that doesn't always count—rather the other way about. Anyhow she's a *ripper!* Pierrot calls her a 'cult'—but that's a bit over my head!" She gave her frank, infectious laugh. "You'll love her house—it's just like her. Jinks—that's Lord Talgarth—gives her entire control. She's been mistress there since their parents' death, but when Jinks went to the Front he insisted on a chaperon. An old scream—you should just see her! Fiammetta calls her 'my Sacrifice'—to convention of course—a Miss Bellace, some kind of a poor relation. Trots after like a dog and *worships* Fiammetta, who turns over to her all the men she doesn't want. As Fiammetta says, she's invaluable in love-affairs, offers the victims a 'paralytic consolation.' Or if they refuse to be soothed she threatens to write to Jinks who's with the Army of Occupation. Well, when shall we go there?"

Torquil, in the dim entrance lounge at the foot of the

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staircase, avoided Nan's bright eyes. His one desire was to escape and analyse his sensations. But he dared not refuse point-blank and add to her curiosity. Therefore he temporized:

"I'm afraid I can't say at present. I'm so tremendously busy writing. I oughtn't to have come out to-day, but I couldn't resist the temptation." He hoped that his smile looked natural.

"Well, I'll drop you a line," Nan suggested. "I'm rather full up myself. Taking part in a Masque for one of Mum's charities. Fiammetta's written the music—she practically got it up—and we're hard at it with rehearsals. Sapristi, *that's* it!" She stared at Torquil. "You'd do jolly well in Stracey's place—my cousin who's crocked up his game knee. The right height; dark, too! I'll bet Fiammetta spotted it. Can you dance?"

"No." Torquil stiffened.

"I'll teach you," said Nan airily.

He must act now; he was frightened, seeing the web closed round him.

"I'm afraid, Miss Considine, that you mustn't count on me for any sort of social work. I've no time for society. People will never realize that because an author works at home his hours are as long—and longer—than those of a man who goes to his office." He added a trifle bitterly, "Nor that his privacy should be equally respected. I daren't break into my work. Everything must go before it."

Nan looked at him wickedly.

"Even Fiammetta?"

Torquil nodded, his lips compressed.

"We'll see!" She laughed, unbelieving, straightened her hat with a glance at the mirror and searched for her powder-puff. "You can't come on somewhere to tea—Rumpelmayer's?" she suggested.

"I mustn't. Shall I get you a taxi?"

Nan looked rueful.

"No, I'm walking." The paymaster had failed her.

They passed through the revolving doors into the glare

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of the daylight. Nan blinked. Torquil's face looked pale and strained. She noticed the fact.

"I believe you work too hard," she said. "You take a day off—drop me a line first—and I'll ring up Fiammetta and find out when she'll be in. Is that agreed?" She held out her hand.

He murmured a word of thanks and saw her attention wander, as the man with the merry eyes emerged from the portals behind them.

"Good-bye!" She was off.

As he moved away he heard her cheerful: "Hullo, Jake!" and the last glimpse he had of her was with one foot on the step of a taxi, laughing from under the brim of her hat whilst her cavalier directed the driver: "The Carlton—and hurry up!"

Torquil dived into the maze of traffic and headed down the Brompton Road.

Fool, triple fool that he was, to run his head into such a noose! Lyddon's sister—that little "Fia" who had wanted to come up for May-week but whom Lyddon had voted "too young." He was "not going to have her spoilt," he believed in "keeping her a kid." Torquil remembered now. Remembered, too, the light in his friend's face, testifying to his devotion.

His sister! He might have guessed it. She had his clear white skin, and his mobile, arched brows, though Lyddon's hair had been darker, with only a tinge of copper in it, and his eyes, unlike hers, were hazel. But she held the same fascination for Torquil; beauty and brains and an exquisite finish that betrayed itself in movement and voice, and that assurance he coveted which was physical as well as mental.

Why should she move him so? Was it the call of the blood? Some ignored hereditary factor bequeathed to him by the man who had ruined Torquil's mother. The mystery of his birth rose anew to torture him. He was not the butcher's son—he held no doubts on this point—but was he, could he be, the Squire's? Squire Pomfret of Pomfret's

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Folly. A bastard! Sam Oliphant, the enemy of his boyhood, had called him this in the open street, and they had fought behind the woodstack of the *Rose and Crown;* a double defeat, since the butcher had thrashed Torquil later for "breaking the Sabbath Day."

And Fiammetta had asked him to call!

He hated her. Full well he guessed that the carelessly flung invitation had been born of perversity. A man who refused an introduction? Here was something worth taming! She was weary of her many conquests. And yet, at the mention of his name, she had seemed more human, remembered his book. She was fond of clever people—so Nan said—an artist herself. Was he misjudging her? He strode on, lost to the world.

No, she was flesh of Lyddon's flesh! Go to see her? He would be shot before he set foot in her house. He could picture it vividly and the well-remembered scene. The white stones bathed in moonlight, the black car, the strip of carpet and the flash of her scarlet heels. It had been his Fate to meet her again. Romance in the heart of London, his "lady of the gondola." But to lose her so soon—Lyddon's sister! Surely the gods were mocking him.

The horn of a motor sounded afar, a flute-like note, softened by distance, and Torquil, still moving in a dream, thought of the shepherd with his pipe on the stony hills above St. Cyr. And of Josephine—— He paused, aghast at the sudden change in himself. Hazy, curiously void of youth, her vision rose in a swift contrast to the figure swaying in the dance, virginal yet capped by fire. Silver and flame. He remembered words he had uttered in the Westwick garden: "a path of moonlight"—Josephine. She was powerless to hurt him, but Fiammetta could scorch his soul. He cursed himself for his weakness. To be tripped up at last by desire, a man impervious to passion, vowed to work, and the memory of a "hopeless love"!

Why had he ever sought to emerge from his hermit-like security? Vanity of vanities. Desperate, he found an ex-

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cuse. It was necessary for an author to see life from all sides, to be alive to the trend of the times. Many a man had lost hold by writing only of the past and his own narrow environment. Merriman had pointed this out and had first advised Torquil to "mix in society." It was Merriman's fault—*damn* Merriman!

A sudden vibration beneath his feet and the roar and clatter of a train brought Torquil to a standstill. Where was he? He stared down at a low and dirty wall, and found himself standing on the bridge that breaks the monotony of the endless Cromwell Road with, beneath him, the District Railway—a section between the tunnels. A forlorn row of cabbage stalks against a strip of sooty soil—the travesty of cultivation—broke the surface of the bank. A man, in shirt sleeves, his braces hanging, one foot on a spade, was staring in the track of the train. Torquil could see his face, brutishly vacant, head thrust forward on his muscle-bound shoulders.

It gave him a queer feeling of horror. He turned away, retracing his steps. To be doomed all one's days to manual labour until the worn-out body became the only vehicle of emotion, the brain blunted by disuse. To eat and drink and beget children: the sum of a man's existence. Those old men, too, in the clubs, at the other end of the social scale, who for passion substituted greed, sniffing like dogs over their food or, churlish, obeying some doctor's "diet." Made in the likeness of the Creator. What a mockery it was! One foot in the grave and nothing to show for the spent days, save wasted tissues.

Thank God he was still young! And free, master of his soul. Of his body, too—he swore it. Since love—the transparent, wistful affection of the days at Les Lecques—had failed him, work should be his salvation. He swung down Gloucester Road in huge strides that brought him, glowing, across the dividing line to Chelsea. The grocer's wife at the corner of the turning that led to his quiet Square smiled and nodded as he passed and he called out affably "Good evening!" For his mood had changed. He felt

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released from his old haunting fear. No woman should interfere with his life. On a sudden thought he wheeled round and entered the shop to buy a loaf and a slice of cheese—for the little store supplied both—which would serve for his supper, with no break in his writing. He watched the grocer's young wife reach up to the shelf, her bosom swelling under her blue overall, her fair hair neatly coiled showing the fine shape of her head. About her was the healthy air of those who work and are satisfied with simple pleasures and small profits, unharassed by vast ambitions. She was worth a dozen of the women, restless in their finery, socially envious of each other, who had joined in the pageant that afternoon. He paid her and passed on, the loaf a grotesque parcel. But in Chelsea a loaf was a loaf and not an embarrassing possession. He broke off a piece of crust, temptingly crisp, as he put it down on his littered writing-table. How good it tasted! Utterly different from the slab-like sandwiches at the fashionable wedding. It was fine to be back in this bare room with the green lawns under his open windows and to feel the driving thrust of his work.

Slowly the twilight deepened; the steam crane sank to rest; the sparrows were silenced too. On the balcony of the hospital, white-capped nurses stole forth for a breath of the cool evening air before returning to their duty. Night settled down on London. Torquil's pen moved rapidly, but once there came a long pause as he stared before him, his face perplexed. Was his hero a trifle wasted on the lady of his choice; a man so vitally alive, so consciously independent? No. The Josephine of his book was alive too—and young as Spring!

Torquil smiled, then shrugged his shoulders. On he went with his story of love. Later, as he corrected the chapter, he found an unpardonable slip. Her eyes were grey, with starry lights, and not the "colour of sea water"!

. . . . . .

The days sped by unheeded; Torquil drugged himself with work. His book was the only reality, though he was

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conscious of green leaves that sprouted with engaging swiftness and of the hawthorn shedding petals when he slipped out for his meals. He lived in a dream—satisfied. Then the reaction set in. He awoke one morning feeling cramped in mind and body; wrote, corrected, re-corrected, and in a rage tore up the result. He lunched at a little restaurant in the King's Road, indulged in coffee to clear his benumbed brain, but decided to cut work. Merriman was back from Paris. Torquil, restless, set forth to inquire the fate of his published book. He had seen a good review that morning; not lavish of praise but treating his work with an undertone of respect and ending up with a prophecy of fulfilment in a later volume. He was beginning to understand the value of such criticism.

He was kept waiting at the office, a fact that increased his nervous strain, but at last he was ushered into the presence. Merriman greeted him genially and commented upon the obvious improvement in his health. They talked in a casual fashion for a few minutes, then the publisher asked how the new book was going.

"Fine." Torquil's head went up and back, his chin thrust forward. "It's good work."

Merriman smiled. He recognized his author's mood.

"Yes, you'll improve as you go on. There's no royal road to writing. Experience is the only teacher, and a steady progress is best in the end. Most people have *one* book in them. Sometimes it meets with a great success, to be followed by a series of failures. Your third book will be a test."

"It will stand it," Torquil asserted. He thrust out his long legs and stared aggressively at his boots. "I called in to ask for figures of the sales up to date of *A Self-made Man*," he announced. "I suppose it's still in the first edition?"

"It is. The subscriptions were quite good, a distinct advance on your last, but it's too early to judge at present. We must wait for the repeat orders. Still, I'm glad you called to-day. The American mails are in from my publish-

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ing house there and there's some good news for you. As you know it's been out in New York some time, and it seems to have caught on—has nearly run out of stock and is now going to press again."

"Really?" Torquil's expression had changed. He leaned forward eagerly. "I never thought of America. I suppose that's pretty useful?"

"If it continues, it means money. In the States they *buy* books—less an affair of the libraries—and of course it's a vast country. It's unusual, too, with a new author but I daresay the title helps and your democratic outlook." He smiled. "I must congratulate you."

"Thank you, sir."

For a moment the old and the young eyes met. Merriman's were a shade wistful. Did Torquil take all praise to himself? The book was a quiet triumph of publishing in these difficult times, both paper and binding far above the average, and Merriman had not stinted influence or advertisement. Torquil owed his redeemed health to his publisher's generosity and the care lavished on him at Les Lecques. Was he too proud to acknowledge the debt? He waited. Some cord of telepathy must have vibrated between them, for Torquil asked abruptly:

"How is Mrs. Merriman?"

"She's well, and busy, down at Westwick, getting it ready for the summer. But she's coming to town for a little, next month."

"I must call and thank her for all her kindness at Les Lecques." Torquil's eyes were averted.

In Merriman's ears it sounded formal.

"Yes. Look us up." His voice was short.

The office boy tapped at the door and announced another visitor. Torquil rose to his feet.

"I expect you're busy," he suggested. "When shall you want my new book?"

Merriman laughed outright. Torquil had the air of conferring a benefit.

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"If you let us have it six months from now that will give us ample time."

"Six *months!*" Torquil looked blank. "You mean that? Why, I'm two-thirds through it."

"You'll be able to polish it then." Merriman's deep-set eyes twinkled. "Publishing is not easy now. I've books held up from last year which must come out before yours. But, apart from that, as you go on, one book a year is quite sufficient. You mustn't weary your public—or write yourself out before you're thirty!" He continued more seriously, "I'm speaking now in your own interest. If you want to take your stand as an author to be respected, you will follow my advice. I only brought out your present book so soon on the heels of the last to familiarize an unknown name. Now we must go more slowly. Don't hurry this new novel. Study your work—improve your style. Get about, too, and see life. It won't do you any harm." Another tap came at the door and Merriman shook hands. "Good-bye." Then, to the office boy, "Shew Mr. X—— in." He mentioned a famous name.

Only when he had swung himself on to a bus for the homeward journey did it occur to Torquil that he had come away without any definite figures. He detected in this his publisher's guile. He was both elated and impatient. Splendid, the American news. But one book a year? Ridiculous! He could turn out two easily. It was all very well for Merriman, who had to think of his other authors, the dearth of paper and so forth, but Torquil saw his progress checked. If the public approved of his work, they would be crying out for more. It was an excuse of Merriman's to cover his own lack of hustle. But he wasn't the only publisher! There were younger firms with newer methods, glad to get a rising author.

He didn't care for Merriman's manner: that superior, amused attitude of an elderly man towards a youth. Genius had no age. If Merriman, now, *wrote* the books . . .? Damn it all, he was only a tradesman with a shrewd appre-

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ciation of values. Of course in a way he'd been kind to Torquil, but wasn't it a sound investment? He would get his money back. It must cost something to keep up Westwick and the mansion in Bloomsbury.

Josephine had been more sincere. She liked Torquil for himself. She was—what was the word? Motherly. He shrank from the thought, so detrimental to romance. Sisterly—that was better, but still too material. He had felt curiously relieved to learn that she was at Westwick. He pictured her making lavender bags in the tower sacred to Sister Ann—with that sublime disregard for the seasons of authors whose snowdrops flower in June! But how indistinct she had become. The real Josephine lived in his book. She was flesh and blood, the other a spirit. Suddenly he recalled a speech he had laughingly made at Les Lecques anent Mrs. Rollit's obsession: "I should rather like a spirit wife!" And then the alternative, recommended by Merriman, "Get about and see life."

Not he! That way danger lay. Nan and her social crowd, with its unforeseen temptations. Restless, he got out of the bus when it stopped at Hyde Park Corner, and wandered up towards the grass, skirting the long rows of chairs, deserted, for the day was fresh with a distracting, gusty wind, that seemed to blow from every quarter, and was charged with fine grit.

Torquil found himself at last standing on the edge of the path opposite Grosvenor Gate, looking across at his dream house.

The sap was rising fast in the trees, the sticky buds of the sycamore long since shed to show green tassels, the planes in a smother of delicate leaves. The Spring was in his own blood too.

From the windows of the little house a man could watch the swift growth: Nature flinging out her banners after the long barren months. A pair of children rode past, a groom closely in their wake. The breeze tossed the fair hair of the little girl in a cloud about her rosy, excited face as she tugged at the mouth of the patient pony. Beyond, a

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carriage rolled heavily, drawn by a pair of elderly horses, the sun glinting on their harness, and a small car, painted blue with a girl at the wheel, slipped past and turned with a sweeping curve a few yards up the road. There was a sudden grind of brakes and it halted, by the curb, under Torquil's absent eyes. A clear, mischievous voice hailed him.

"Thinking out a new book?"

He looked down. It was Fiammetta!

She wore a tanned leather coat of a warm copper colour that suggested the hue of her hidden hair, under the drawn-down toque made of peacock's feathers—the iridescent breast plumage. In her little ears were emerald studs and to-day there was no blue in her eyes. They shone like green sea-water, under the curling lashes of pale brown, tipped with gold, and danced as they witnessed Torquil's amazement.

"Did I startle you? Never mind. Get in and come for a drive?" She held back the grey fur rug invitingly.

He found his voice.

"Oh—how do you do? I'm afraid——" He sought desperately for an excuse but his wits had deserted him.

"You can't pretend that you're busy," she laughed back. "I've passed you twice, lost in dreams, on that same patch. Are you fond of music?"

His eyes widened. The question disconcerted him, breaking the sequence of his thoughts.

"Yes, of course. Why?" he stammered.

A little thread of silken hair had escaped from beneath the mass of shot blue and green feathers. It lay against her pale cheek like a coil of the finest copper wire. He could not remove his gaze from it.

She answered him indirectly.

"That settles the matter. Get in. I promise you, you won't regret it."

It seemed to Torquil that his will had passed out of his possession. She drew him by invisible cords that only her own magic could sever. Before he knew the extent of his weakness, he found himself seated by her side, conscious of

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the throb of the car and the warmth of the rug that imprisoned his knees. Conscious, too, there was no escape—that he did not wish to escape! It was enough for him to feel the perilous proximity of her youthful body, and to see the clean lines of her face against the swiftly moving background, the slender hands in their fringed gloves grasping the steering-wheel.

He was caught up, scorched, in the flame.

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CHAPTER XIII

HOW he loved her for her silence! Another woman would have chattered, forcing him to reply, but not until they capped the rise of the long Putney hill and turned to the right across the Common did her sealed lips unclose. She drove with a careless zest, leaning back in her seat; trickily, showing off the car as they slipped in and out of the traffic, but with no evidence of nerves. She was Lyddon all over again, doing amazing stunts, a cigarette hanging from his lip, mischief in his sleepy smile; playing the fool, yet level-headed.

Torquil thrust the memory from him. To-day he would live in the present. Over a villa wall a torrent of laburnum poured and from the ragged undergrowth on the Common rose the fragrance of earth yielding up its hoarded moisture under the golden rays of the sun. The wind, like a wild colt, galloped up, to swerve in their faces and show its heels, with a toss of streaming mane. Fiammetta bent her head and the feathers on her hat were broken into rippling, iridescent waves. Now he could see the nape of her neck like white jade above her collar and the sweep of her burnished hair. She was wonderful: a creature of gold and crystal, set with strange jewels.

The wind dropped and she relapsed into her lounging attitude.

"Well." Her eyes darted sideways. "Are you still cross at being kidnapped?"

"If I had been, I shouldn't have come." He must hold his own at any cost. He was too conscious of his weakness.

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She made no comment, but switched on the brake as they slid down a long slope, with prim houses standing back, each with its carriage gate and travesty of a drive.

"How would you like to live in a villa called 'Rosemount'?" she suggested.

"Not overmuch. And you?" He was cautious.

"It might be amusing—you never know! Pierrot—that's Pierre de Lusignan, a friend of mine—declares that no one really lives in these houses. They have a dug-out at the back. The rest is merely decoration—canvas and camouflage. I believe he's right. You never see any one at the windows, or going out, or coming in. It's a magnificent deception, like scenery at Earl's Court. The doors and windows aren't real, just an effect of paint and perspective. Look! There's a painted dog, sitting on a painted doorstep."

Torquil smiled, caught by her fancy.

"And he's hunting for a painted flea!"

"That's the artist's realism," she laughed back, unconvinced.

On they went, escaping from London but still conscious of pursuit.

At last Torquil summoned courage to inquire their destination.

"So you *are* curious, after all?" She gave him a mischievous glance. "What do you say to Land's End?" She saw the light leap up in his eyes and went on rather quickly, fearful of his imagination, "We're only going to Hampton Court. To see a dear old friend of mine—the direct descendant of Tubal Cain—and to hear him 'make music.' He's quite mad. I promised Jinks that I would never go there alone. That's why I picked you up in the Park. And, now that I've set your mind at rest, you can go back to your book—I shan't interrupt you again—that chapter I ruthlessly broke into."

"Thanks." He felt, and looked, offended. She didn't want his company but only to make use of him, an inconspicuous body-guard. That was the way of "society girls"!

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They were selfish to the core, blind to all but their own amusement.

Then, softly, she spoke again.

"I mean it. I'm a worker myself, and I loathe being interrupted."

So it wasn't heartless mockery? But what a power she held to wound him. By a light word or the curl of a lip. He said:

"I'd much rather talk."

She nodded and left the subject to him.

Silence settled down between them; a ghastly thing like a sea fog, clouding his brain. No words would come. Suddenly he became aware of a ripple that passed across her shoulders. A little sob of checked mirth broke from her. She turned her head, her eyes dancing. For a moment, his dignity at stake, he resisted the unspoken jest; then the sweet, sound gift of laughter knit them together—a bond of youth.

"Tell me about Nan, playing the tourist at Tarascon? It must have been quaint," she suggested.

So they had talked of him? His spirits rose, unlocking the gates of his eloquence. He found himself carrying her to the South on a swirl of vivid, enamoured language. To Provence—the land of the Troubadours. How well she fitted into the picture! Only once did he check himself, aware of a perilous ribaldry encouraged by some saintly legend. Was she a Catholic? He risked the question nervously.

"A *Roman* Catholic?" she corrected. "No. You're not shocking me. Go on about the Tarasque. It sounds like a second cousin to Carpaccio's Basilisk. I love all those mythical beasts. Couldn't I work it into my Masque?"

He looked up eagerly, recognizing a fellow-spirit: the eternal call for fresh "copy."

"Why not?" He saw that her face was veiled in a sudden abstraction. "But how would you do it?"

"An absurd dance—to solemn music. No, it's impossible! One couldn't bring in St. Martha. It might offend

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religious people and, of course, it's for a charity. What a pity! Can't you see me, leading the Tarasque on a ribbon?"

"I can see you—leading the world." It slipped out fervently, and a sudden panic succeeded the words.

"The Flesh and the Devil," she added gaily. Torquil drew a breath of relief; he was saved. "But what should I represent?"

"Desire," he thought. Out aloud, he substituted, "Imagination."

"Yes—that's good. The Uncrowned Leader. Unrecognized, save by the few, elusive, in a phantom dance." There was mystery in the curve of her lips.

In a dream they sped through Kingston. Now silence was a beautiful thing. It would be sacrilege to break it.

They came at last to an open space suggesting a village green and turned off to the left.

"We're here." Her voice was abrupt. She drew up at the further entrance of a house in the uneven row of quaint old buildings facing the grass. "Will you get down and open the gates? Then I'll take the car inside."

Torquil obeyed her directions. She steered it between the crumbling posts, stopped the engines and stood up.

"I shan't want this indoors." She slipped off the leather coat and flung it across the back of the car.

He helped her down with a glance at her feet. Antelope shoes, with *blue* heels, matching her peacock gown. From her white throat hung Mummy beads, like flakes from an Egyptian tile. As she drew off her fringed gloves, he saw a green-blue scarab ring on her finger—a carved turquoise, dimmed by age, set in a band of silver. The "Serpent of Nile"—Cleopatra! The thought was followed by another, stirred from memory's hiding-place, his scornful retort to Josephine: "She ruined Mark Antony." A sudden sense of peril seized him. He stiffened, frowning down at her. What was she saying? His anger increased.

"A *German!*" He gave a quick look at the house, mistrustful, as if he expected some trap.

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"Yes, but naturalized. The greatest pianist of his day —cruelly treated. Not by us. By the Huns—just like them!" Her lip curled. "He was worshipped in Berlin and in every foreign capital, Petrograd especially. He lived there for ten years, attached to the Russian Court. Then, in his old age, he longed for Germany again and returned —to find he was forgotten! It was the era of Richard Strauss. His concert-hall was half-filled; there was a dastardly criticism, a combination of agents against him, all bought by newer men. He was *vieux jeu*—they laughed at him! He shook the dust from off his feet, came to England, was naturalized, and settled down as a teacher. But his heart was broken. He's never recovered." A quiver came into her hushed voice.

Torquil's resentment melted before it.

"I see." It was an apology.

She looked at him steadily.

"You mustn't come in unless you *want* to. Not if you feel aggressive. He'd know it. I can't have him hurt. He's my friend." Her proud head went up.

"I want to." He was humbled; a new sensation, part pleasure, part pain.

She smiled and spoke impulsively:

"Oh, I knew I was right, in the Park."

He glowed under her subtle praise. She had chosen him deliberately, out of her crowd of friends; not only as useful but understanding. Bless her! He followed her to the porch.

A German servant opened the door, an old man, wrinkled, mistrustful. His face cleared when he saw Fiammetta. She greeted him in his own language. It gave Torquil a queer shock—a sense of disloyalty—but he shook it off determinedly. Fair play. She expected it. The man was an outcast; England his refuge.

Fiammetta beckoned to him and made her way down a long, flagged passage that ended in mahogany doors, a feature of the old house. She opened them gently. A sudden wave of music swept out into their faces. Stunned

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by its volume, Torquil paused, staring at the panelled room with its polished floor and sense of space, unbroken by furniture, given up to the grand piano from which rolled those mighty chords. The light filtered in through a window that was low and long with a cushioned seat. It left the corners veiled in shadows, but haloed the massive head of the engrossed musician. Fiammetta had moved forward into his line of vision, and Torquil could see the deep old eyes, sunk in a settled melancholy, light up as she reached his side.

"Ach, my Beautiful, it is Thou!" His fingers quivered and grew rigid, the pedal sustaining the last notes. "Thou hast come to hear an old man play?"

Her arm went round his bent shoulders, a gesture filial yet protective. She whispered something in his ear.

"So?" He raised his hands for a second. With a delicate gesture, as though he plucked something alive from the ivory keys, he picked up the broken melody and was lost once more in his dreams.

Fiammetta withdrew on tiptoe and settled herself in the window-seat, signing to Torquil. He sat down beside her. She whispered, under her breath:

"I can't introduce you—you understand? If he's interrupted by a stranger, he gets angry or he cries. The war completed the wreck of his nerves."

"They didn't intern him?"

She shook her head.

"We—a few sane people—saw to that, mercifully. Still he suffered. The long strain and the unending suspicion. He hardly went outside his door."

Torquil nodded. Fiammetta leaned back and gave herself up to that faultless execution. He felt her drift away from him into a land he could not enter. Although he loved it, he had no knowledge of music to match her own. He was fascinated nevertheless, by the power that poured from the shrunken figure, wrapped in a padded dressing-gown, frayed at the turned-back cuffs. It was thrown open at the neck and the cords stood out in the wasted throat

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that seemed too frail for the size of his head. There were bluish hollows in his cheeks and the under-lip sagged, slightly vacant. But the forehead retained its nobility and the wonderful, supple, ivory hands. The soul lived on, though the brain was clouded.

His eyes came back to Fiammetta. Behind her was a curtain in a peculiar vivid purple that hung in straight stiff lines of silk interwoven with silver thread. Wonderful stuff! His fingers stole to the fellow drapery at his side. The girl caught the action and nodded.

"It came out of the Winter Palace—a present from the late Czarina. That writing-table, too," she whispered, pointing to the far corner. "The top's one slab of malachite, with a border of worked gold. Those jewels studding it are real. It must be worth a king's ransom. That case beyond holds all his orders." She stopped, her finger to her lips. The music had sunk to a thread of sound like wind sighing over the sea.

Torquil found himself holding his breath, fearful of missing those phantom notes. He shifted his position slightly, to lean against the folded shutters, and became aware of Bushey Park stretching away from the window into violet distances. A herd of deer browsed under the trees, barely a stone's throw from the house. It was like a background of tapestry, of dappled green and brown stitches, with, against it, the girl's still head. Now he knew, the vision complete. In far-off, mediæval days he had been her devout page, dedicated to her service, writing for her some Romance of the Rose, to sing, impassioned, over his lute, as she listened by her embroidery frame. Or perhaps Boccaccio himself, betraying his love for the Queen of Naples: the Fiammetta of his stories. Legend. The music whispered the word—eternal fancy and inspiration.

Twilight stole up through the trees but Torquil dreamed on. He saw himself, laurel-crowned, laying his life-work before her; his masterpiece, bound in vellum, folded between those slender hands.

He started, feeling her stir. She whispered:

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"We must go. It's getting late. If we're quiet, we shan't disturb him. Follow me." She rose softly and they stole across by the farther wall. He felt for the handle of the door and opened it. They were outside, undetected, no break in the stately music. He drew a deep breath of relief and looked at his fellow-conspirator.

"Well, was it worth it?" she asked lightly.

Again he felt tongue-tied.

"You know it was," he murmured, vexed.

"Copy!" she said provokingly. "And it isn't over yet. There's a contrast to follow that will delight not only your artistic soul but—well, the inner man!"

She was off, down the flagged passage, had crossed the hall and turned aside to tap at a painted door before Torquil caught her up.

A sharp voice answered, "Come!"

Torquil, over her shoulder, as she entered the room, saw a kitchen, spotlessly clean, with a fine array of polished pans. A woman bent over the stove, stirring some steaming mixture and in the air was the fragrant scent of vanilla pods and chocolate. She greeted them volubly, in German. Torquil understood but little. He gathered that they were expected; "Johann" had fetched the cream. Would they sit down, please, and pardon her if she saw to "the Master" first. On the table was a checked cloth, thick cups and a cake.

The woman wore a big apron over her voluminous skirts; her sleeves were rolled above her elbows. Her plain but kindly face was hot, under her strained back, grey hair. A German cook, he decided, trying in vain to follow the chatter. At last, Fiammetta mentioned his name, adding "an author, fond of music."

The old woman nodded and smiled. Had "the Master" played? Was he looking tired?

"We keep up his strength, *so*——" She broke an egg into a basin, beat it quickly and strained it into one of the thick cups, then filled this up with chocolate, steaming, from off the stove. From another basin she took a big

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spoonful of whipped cream and nodded at Torquil. "Of the egg he nothing knows!" She crowned the cup with a snowy crest.

"*Bitte,* excuse me." She passed out, carrying the little tray, her shapeless body amazingly active.

"She adores him," said Fiammetta, smiling. "I hope you like chocolate? It's always so good here. Let's cut the cake—I'm hungry. I love tea in the kitchen."

Here was another side to the girl who had danced at the wedding, a social success. He watched her pointed teeth close on the slice like a happy schoolgirl's, and wondered. She made a little grimace at him.

"Try it. It's *delicious!*"

He followed her example and, when the old woman returned, drank the thick chocolate with its vanilla-flavoured cream, inwardly amused at the picture of his lady, her elbows propped on the table, so utterly at ease, chattering to the old servant. No, she was not the Fiammetta of Boccaccio's roving fancy. It was an insult. She was a child, on the borderland of womanhood, still jealous of her toys.

Later, as he tucked the rug about her in the car, he was conscious of a change in her, a swift resumption of dignity. Yet to his deep amazement she had kissed the old woman on both cheeks, bidding her "take care of the Master" when they parted from her in the hall. Now, aloof in her leathern coat, she drove, her eyes fixed ahead, ignoring the man by her side, forgetful, apparently, of his presence.

On they went, past shops and houses, out into the open country. He fretted against her indifference. At last, in despair, he broke the silence:

"He's lucky to have a woman like that to look after him, poor old chap. Nothing like a good cook, even if you are a genius!"

The car swerved out of its course as she turned her head and stared at him.

"Cook? She's his *wife!*" A laugh escaped her, completing Torquil's discomfiture.

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"Wife? I—— You didn't say so." He began to stammer, hot and angry. "She c-called him 'the Master,' so—well, it was a k-kitchen, wasn't it?"

Fiammetta rocked on her seat.

"Then that's why you were so stiff! And I never guessed." She bubbled over. "Oh, Torquil, you are delicious!"

In the midst of his resentment the sound of his name on her lips startled him. It seemed full of a new charm and significance. Was it really so musical? He had adopted it on account of a certain hard ring. A Highland name that held to him the cold depths of a Northern loch. Now she gave it a warm grace. Yet he sulked, aware of ridicule; the bitterest draught to a man in love.

The car spun on through the gloom, the fringed gloves on the wheel. He would not even look at her. She said, as if to herself:

"A relic of old Germany. Before all that was fine and simple was trodden under by the Prussian. A ruined nation, body and soul. Yet there must be a leaven somewhere? That dear old woman, now. It's a perfect *Liebeslied*. She could have shared in his triumphs, been the friend of queens, yet she chose instead to remain a simple background figure, wrapped up in her man's comfort. Isn't that love at its highest?"

"I suppose so." His voice was grudging.

"It's what you preached yourself," she persisted, "in *An Outsider*—the main thesis. A simplicity, finer than any tradition of birth, and a nobility, the result of character. Well, here you have it in the flesh. Don't you like it?" She switched the brakes on so suddenly that the car jarred and groaned beneath them and a dark object slipped across the road and leaped into the hedge. "My God, I thought I'd run over that cat!"

The engine had stopped. He saw her hand for a moment pressed to her heart.

"It's all right. You didn't," he said. "Little brute! It deserved it."

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She gave a rather shaky laugh.

"We must get down and light the lamps. Or they'll run us in when we come to London."

He helped her out. She leaned on his arm and paused, to look at his sombre face.

"First I spoil your afternoon by teasing you, and then, I nearly murder a cat! Anyhow I deserve a fright. Am I a good thought-reader?"

"You are." He fought against her charm.

"Then I'll add the sequel: I'm forgiven?" Her narrowed eyes searched his.

He was silent, baffled, mistrusting his voice.

"If you don't forgive me"—her lips quivered—"I shall leave you here in the wilderness. I'm sensitive, too, you see."

"Ah, don't!" It was wrung from him. Was she still mocking, or serious?

"Torquil"—her lips barely moved—"I'm a little beast. Let's light the lamps." She slipped past him, but not before he had felt the quick pressure of her hand on his arm, repentant and sincere.

He helped her clumsily, in silence. The glow that spread in a fan on the road lit up her white face and accentuated the gloom around them and the emptiness of the open waste. They seemed to be alone in the world. As she straightened herself, a gust of wind tore at her coat and it swung wide, flapping like a loose sail. Torquil caught it and drew it together. With fingers that shook, he fastened the buttons.

"You mustn't catch cold," he said roughly, concealing the joy he felt. She was his for the moment, at his mercy.

"I never catch cold. Jinks used to say that my red hair kept me warm. A stove burning in the attic!" She scrambled up into the car.

"A flame." Torquil drew up the rug. "When you danced the other day it reminded me of some verses called 'The Little Salamander.' Do you know them?"

"No." She started the car. "Tell me?" They throbbed on through the dusk.

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He leaned closer, afraid that the wind might blow half the words away. He gave the lines their full value:

"When I go free
I think 'twill be
A night of stars and snow,
And the wild fires of frost shall light
My footsteps as I go;
Nobody—nobody will be there
With groping touch, or sight,
To see me in my bush of hair
Dance burning through the night."

He heard her whisper under her breath, "'Nobody—nobody will be there.'"

"Nobody." His voice was exultant. She would be sacred from man's desire.

"I couldn't stand it. I love life." A little shiver passed over her. "But I like 'the white fires of frost.' Who wrote it?"

"Walter De La Mare."

"Say it again. I want to learn it."

He did so, his eyes fixed on her face, taking a long farewell of her. This must be their last meeting. She would come between him and his work. He was stronger than Mark Antony.

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CHAPTER XIV

JOSEPHINE was writing letters in the drawing-room of the Bloomsbury house when the maid ushered in Heron. Through a great bough of apple blossom, she saw his ugly, powerful face. A smile lurked in the blue eyes.

"On the principle of Mahomet and the Mountain I've brought you my orchard," he explained, lowering his burden into her eager, outstretched hands.

"How perfectly lovely!"

"Isn't it? You should just see the country now." He drank in her simple pleasure. "Don't you think it was brave of me to march through the London streets like this? At every moment I expected to hear some cockney voice sing out: 'For I'm to be Queen of the *My*, mother,' or be run in for obstructing the traffic. In Piccadilly I got tied up with a lady's veil—a terrible business! A veil that fell loose to her knees. Is that the latest fashion? She looked like a currant bush securely protected from the birds—and she wasn't at all tempting either!"

"Sure?" Josephine laughed back. She buried her face in the blossom and was seized with a sudden scruple. "Oh, David, think of all those apples!"

"There's gratitude!" He gave a chuckle. "If you were a politician you'd add, 'Still, it's not too late yet for a frost,' and feel your public conscience cleared. A bird in the hand is worth two in the—veil!"

"I mistrust that adventure!"

"You shouldn't. I'm here—*with* the flowers! Hardly a petal missing, save one which I left to cover a hole. Luckily, she didn't spot it. Now, hadn't I better ring for Élise to plant that tree?"

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"If you will? But I haven't thanked you properly."

Heron paused, his hand on the bell.

"Oh, I'm going to claim my reward. I expect you to lunch with me. Now, don't say you're engaged?" He had seen a shadow cross her face.

"I'm not. But couldn't we lunch here?"

"Why?" He smiled, aware of her reason: a desire to save him from expense. "I believe you're afraid of my choice of food, having seen my picnic meals at Westwick. As a matter of fact, when I'm in town I do myself rather well."

"Oh, it isn't that!"

"Then, come along? I booked a table on my way at the Café Royal for 1.30. So you'd better get on your hat."

"I must change." She looked down at her clothes.

"Nonsense! I like you in that frock."

"It's *so* old," she protested.

"All the better. It's become a part of yourself, individualized. Here's Élise!" He greeted the maid, smiling discreetly on the threshold. "I'm going to steal your mistress for lunch."

"Bien, monsieur." Her dark eyes glowed. She took the bough of apple-blossom, and listened to Josephine's instructions. "What gown will Madame wear?"

"Oh, you women!" groaned Heron.

Josephine took pity on him.

"All right. I'll go as I am." She dismissed Élise with a smile, fully aware of the maid's disappointment: "My hat and shoes—I'll be up in a minute."

"How is Richard?" asked Heron as the door closed. "I've not seen him for ages."

"He's rather depressed, poor dear. Kerin's death was a great shock. He was only ill two days and Richard was so fond of him. Of course, too, it's a loss to the business. He was Richard's leading author, with an enormous circulation. I've never seen Richard look so old as when he came back from the funeral. He was quite broken up. They'd always got on so well together." She added a shade bitterly,

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"There are not too many loyal authors. Oh, David, I didn't mean that!" She bit her lip, too late aware of the hidden slur. "I know, in your case——" She stopped, fearing to say more, divided in her allegiance.

"He was quite right," said Heron quickly. "I might easily have failed him. Anyhow we've remained good friends. That's something, isn't it?"

"It's everything." She smiled gravely. "I don't know what we should do without you. You and your apple-blossom! I won't be long." She moved to the door, then turned, in sudden mischief. "Shall I wear a veil?"

"Heaven forbid!" He heard her laugh as she ran upstairs. The sound was music in his ears.

He came back into the room, picked up a book that crowned a pile on the table by her favourite chair and saw that it bore Torquil's name.

He dipped idly into the pages. A stray passage caught his eye and he read on with closer attention, his critical faculty aroused:

> ". . . his profound weariness. He found an excuse for his defection on the score of a moral impulse. Virtue could be useful, at times, when dealing with a woman who asked for a Sir Galahad but inwardly favoured Sir Lancelot. She 'relied on his chivalry'? He would justify her confidence. It set him free. He saw himself, riding away from her through the forest of his perplexities and disillusions—a White Knight."

"Very Torquilesque," thought Heron. "Just how he *would* go. And damnably pleased with himself!"

The paper and the clear type appealed to his practised eye. Merriman was doing his share generously in his author's bid for success. There was no scamping in space or material.

"Cost something to produce, in these times," Heron decided. He closed the volume with a shrug of his heavy shoulders and turned to greet Josephine, aware of her step.

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As they drove to the restaurant he asked after his fellow-writer.

"Torquil? He's doing splendidly—so Richard tells me. The new book is having a record sale, both here and in America."

Heron nodded.

"And how is he looking?"

"I haven't seen him since my return." Her eyes did not meet his, but gazed past him at the pavements, crowded, of Shaftesbury Avenue. "I expect he's been busy, working; making up for his holiday." She went on, rather quickly, "Did you see that girl in the patchwork hat? Really, London is amusing! Colour seems to be running mad. I suppose it's the reaction after the drab days of war."

"Probably." Heron's voice was absent. So Torquil had "ridden away" to fresh adventures, forgetting Les Lecques and Josephine's unfailing kindness? He shook himself free from his disgust as they passed through the swing doors of the Café Royal and up the steep, carpeted stairs.

He had secured a corner table in the larger room close to a window and he led his guest to it with the secret pride of a lover, aware of curious glances in passing and his lady's serene unconcern.

"I like this place," he confessed, as they sat down facing the room. "There's plenty of space. You don't get ruffled by waiters charging against your chair, or feel that your neighbours are obliged to share in your conversation."

"And there's no band—such a relief!" Josephine admitted gaily. "I'm so weary of Jazz music. Look! That's Arkwright who's just come in. Detestable man!" She bowed coolly, the bow that a woman gives when she's recognized against her will.

"He's always here—the old poacher! Seeking whom he may devour. I see he's got that clever author of *The Slip Knot* on his new list. Wonderful, how he picks them up."

"It's disgusting," said Josephine. "He never brings out

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a new author but waits until he makes a hit, then bribes him to leave his publisher. Of course he can afford good terms. He has taken no risks and he profits by the initial advertisements—though he doesn't always keep them up. He stole 'Marion Cass' from Richard, but two years later she came back. She couldn't stand Arkwright's ways. He let her down over serial rights and bullied her into changing her style as not sufficiently 'popular.'"

They watched the publisher order his wine with a lordly manner and stroll away to await his guest in the little lounge.

"Let's have a bet," said Heron. "Ten bob to a tanner that it's a man he's expecting. If I win, you give me sixpence."

Josephine hesitated.

"Come, be sporting!" Heron smiled. "I'll confess I'm taking a base advantage, which I'll explain afterwards."

"Done!" She entered into the jest. "Now, tell me all the Westwick news?"

"I'm afraid there's nothing very startling. The Delaportes have come home. She looks worn, but as plucky as ever. Oh, and Oliphant's dismissed. That will please you, I know. She couldn't stand the man's manner. Mrs. Brackney has been ill, and the Colonel, too—influenza. But they're both convalescent now."

"And how is Carrie?"

"Beauteous as ever! Selling eggs 'at market price' and cutting down the margarine. I lunched there last week and foolishly helped myself to butter. It gave Carrie her chance. She set me at ease by remarking: 'Isn't it dreadful the way we're rationed? Only two ounces per head a week.' Hullo!" He stared across the room.

Arkwright was returning, in his wake a tall figure moving with a faint swagger, head flung back aggressively. The pair sat down at a farther table and immediately began to talk, the guest leaning towards his host, engrossed in the latter's conversation.

Heron glanced at Josephine. Her face was strained and

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incredulous. As he watched her, he saw her nostrils curl, an angry light spring up in her eyes.

"I couldn't have believed it," she said. "It's Torquil!"

Heron nodded.

"I'm afraid so."

His reserved answer annoyed her. For once she misjudged her friend.

"You guessed this? That's what you meant when you betted it would be a man."

"Good heavens, no!" He was taken aback. "It was merely because he ordered the wine, and a man is less sure of a woman's taste. Josephine?" His voice pleaded. Rarely did he take advantage of the permission to use her name and it startled her into attention. "Don't let them see you watching them. It may be nothing. There's no reason why Torquil shouldn't lunch with Arkwright. He may want to find out his market value from another publisher. Besides, there's his agreement with Richard."

"It was only for two books." She looked away, helping herself to a dish handed by the waiter. Suddenly it flashed across her that the new novel had been commenced at Les Lecques, herself the main inspiration. Still mistrustful, she felt outraged. Then a memory rose to her aid. The peaceful room with its waxed floor, the windows open on the sea. She could hear again Torquil's voice as he read aloud from the manuscript, his face outlined against the lamp, whilst through the scented Southern night came the faint rustle of the palm leaves, stirred by a passing breeze. *Her* book! He had emphasized this, shyly, with a wistful glance that breathed of gratitude and devotion. How absurd it was to doubt him, even in Arkwright's company and after his apparent neglect. Heron was right. She was too impulsive, too easily hurt by the boy's silence. He was absorbed in his work; not ungrateful, merely thoughtless. She looked up with a smile, feeling Heron's eyes upon her.

"I was only thinking of Richard," she pleaded. "I don't want him to be worried."

"No, you must tell him." His voice was grave.

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"*Must* I? I'm sure it's all right."

"I wouldn't trust Arkwright," he insisted.

"Oh, no." Her scorn equalled his. "But Richard's been so good to Torquil."

"Still, a hint would do no harm." Heron tried to speak lightly. "It might influence him when it comes to terms over the new book. You see?" He filled up her glass and murmured, "Take care. Torquil's seen you."

A faint colour rose in her cheeks. He watched her approvingly as she raised her head with a steady courage and met that distant, startled glance. Across the intervening space the two pairs of eyes met, the dark ones furtive and troubled, the grey full of a clear light.

She smiled and nodded, her brows raised. Torquil bowed awkwardly. A moment later he stood up, murmured something to his host and made his way to the corner table.

"How do you do, Mrs. Merriman?" Her light hand lay in his. It seemed strange to him that her touch had once held the power to thrill him. This was not the Josephine of his book, but a stranger, bearing a wistful resemblance. There were tiny lines round her starry eyes under the cold light of the window; her ashen hair looked like silver. She was a ghost, not a flame that danced, "burning, through the night." He found himself saying smoothly, "I've been coming to see you but, somehow, I've been so frightfully busy lately. You do understand?"

"Of course." She smiled, gracious but dignified. "An author has little time for calls. You remember Mr. Heron?"

"Why, yes!" He nodded, slightly aggressive. "It seems only the other day that I left you both at Les Lecques." He fidgeted. "I mustn't stay, but I wanted one word with you. I'm lunching with Arkwright—I think you know him? Talking shop! It's interesting to hear about other authors. I met him at the Considines." He aired the name a trifle too indifferently and Heron smiled in his sleeve. "An odd thing—I believe Mr. Merriman is bringing out a book of reminiscences written by Lady Mary's cousin."

"It's a small world," said Heron gravely. The phrase

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was anathema to him. He wondered how Torquil would take it. He saw Josephine's lip quiver. Her sense of humour was stirred by Torquil's new society manner.

"The people you met at Tarascon? I remember." She referred to a letter which Torquil had foolishly forgotten.

He coloured, aware of his error and of a vivid caricature of mother and daughter, drawn with malice for Josephine's benefit, in the early days of his wanderings.

"Yes. They've been very kind to me since my return," he explained stiffly.

To Josephine came the swift thought that he could spare time for these *new* friends. Her eyes drifted past him to Arkwright, who was studying the little group.

"You mustn't forget your host," she suggested.

"No. May I come and see you one Sunday?"

"Do. We shall be in town for a month." Her pride made her add pleasantly, "I must congratulate you on the success of your new book." He should not see that she was hurt.

For a moment he was the old Torquil.

"You've heard?"—an absurd boyish question—"It's splendid, isn't it?"

She smiled up into his dark eyes, her generosity aroused, responding to the call of youth.

"I *told* you it would be a success! I'm looking forward now to the next one, and your descriptions of Les Lecques."

His face changed, suddenly sombre.

"I'm afraid you will have some time to wait. Mr. Merriman doesn't want to publish it until next spring—although it's almost finished. Still——" He left the phrase incomplete. "I must go. Good-bye, Mrs. Merriman. So glad to have had a glimpse of you." He nodded to Heron and moved away.

They watched him rejoin his host in a silence that neither cared to break; saw Arkwright lean forward as though he questioned his companion and, a moment after, heard his laugh.

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Heron's mouth instinctively tightened. Trust Torquil? Never, he thought.

"Coming on, isn't he?" There was malice in his glance. He was conscious that Josephine was merely playing with her food. He cursed Torquil for spoiling their lunch. "Are you aware that you owe me sixpence?"

She started, and met his steady glance. Behind the smile and the light remark, she read his unfailing sympathy.

"Do I? Of course. The bet—I'd forgotten! You'll have to wait. This is so delicious." She took a mouthful of sweetbread with a dainty parody of greed.

"I don't think I *can* wait," said Heron. The corners of his lips curled. "In my wildest dreams I never imagined I should make sixpence out of Torquil. That's why I'm so grasping."

"But it isn't Torquil's—it's mine," she protested, with an assumption of gaiety. "Or rather, Richard's."

"It's all the same to an author!" He saw that she had caught his meaning by the faint protest on her face, and changed the subject, anxious to draw her thoughts into a pleasanter channel. "When are you coming back to Westwick?"

"In about a month's time, I hope." She added mysteriously, "for good."

"For the summer, you mean?" he asked quickly.

"No, a little longer than that." She could not resist teasing him. "Do you think you could put up with us as permanent neighbours, David?"

Staring at her, he guessed her secret.

"You're leaving London! Letting the house?"

She nodded, touched by the eagerness that rang out in his voice.

"We hope to dispose of the lease. It's such an expense in these days keeping up two places, and the house is absurdly large for us. I can always run up to an hotel and Richard can fall back on his club. But this is between ourselves at present. Nothing definitely settled. As you know,

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I prefer Westwick, so it's no deprivation to me, and I feel it will lessen Richard's burden. He's not well. I'm worried about him." Her delicate brows were drawn together. "You approve?"

"I do—quite apart from selfish reasons. There's no need to tell you that I'm glad—you know that—but I think it's better for your husband's sake."

"It was very difficult to persuade him. He's attached to the old house, for more than domestic reasons. It was a milestone in his career."

"Yes." Heron looked away. He was wondering what lay behind the words. Was there grave need for retrenchment?

Josephine must have guessed his thought, for she went on rather quickly:

"We shall store most of the furniture. Later on, we might take a flat. Richard hates the idea of a sale, although we should get a good profit now, but it's not so much a question of money as of lessening his responsibilities."

"Of course." Heron agreed promptly. He was not deceived by her argument. He realized that the Merrimans were feeling the pinch of heavy prices and the narrow margins in publishing. In one of those sudden silences which settle mysteriously on a room at intervals, he heard Arkwright's sleek and insinuating voice:

"Well, let me know later on. You have my address?"

The reply was drowned in a rising hum of chatter from the intervening tables.

Heron's strong mouth tightened. Was Torquil aware of his publisher's straits? Would he be the next to desert the ship, fearful of the sunken rocks in the false calm succeeding the storm—that Peace which demanded so heavy a price? Josephine must not read his thoughts. He raised his liqueur glass and smiled at her across the rim.

"To Sister Ann! Won't she be pleased? May I tell her—in strict confidence?"

"Do. *Dear* Sister Ann." The strained look died out of her face.

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"She'll be watching breathlessly now," said Heron. "Gazing up the lane to the station. What is it?" he asked quickly. For a shiver had passed over his guest and it seemed to him that she had paled.

"Nothing!" She straightened her shoulders bravely. "A goose must have walked over my grave."

"Have another *crème de menthe?*"

"My dear David!" She laughed at him. "I'm not accustomed to these orgies. What would Torquil say if he saw his publisher's wife helped out by the waiter?"

"He'd be very worried." Heron grinned. "Tie up his shoe-lace as you passed. I doubt if the situation is dealt with in any book on etiquette."

"Poor Torquil!" Josephine smiled. "You think he's been studying one lately?"

"Learning it off by heart," said Heron. He looked at her wickedly. "I'm jealous—that's the truth. That parting remark, deliciously pat. 'So glad to have had a glimpse of you!' Why can't I think of things like that?"

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CHAPTER XV

HE was utterly miserable. He couldn't write. He could only think of his lost dignity and the bitterness of his disillusion. To have been her dupe in a base intrigue—he used the strongest words he could find—to have helped her, all unwittingly, into the arms of another man!

Why had he broken his solemn vow—losing the perfect memory of that ride home through the dusk, her voice in his ears, the scent of her hair swept across him by the wind? Fiammetta! Torquil groaned, his head laid on his arms across the blotted, hopeless page.

From below came the sound of girlish laughter, and a boy's voice: "Three love! Buck up, you two!" The tennis courts were crowded this sunny Saturday.

Just a fortnight ago, thought Torquil.

He could see himself driving down in the big black car like a gondola to Ranelagh, Fiammetta's guest; Fiammetta, in palest pink with a grey cloak about her shoulders and a hat of folded camelia petals, exquisite as a tropical flower. Beside her, the quaint contrast of Miss Bellace with a Royalty fringe and a tight waist, in a flutter of old-maidish anxiety. Would this wonderful weather last? It was due to the spots on the sun. Why did they laugh? It was perfectly true—she had read it in the *Daily Mail*. Fiammetta, eyes half-closed, smiling lazily at Torquil, encouraging "the Sacrifice" in her miracles of science. The gathering press of carriages, the halt at the gates for the vouchers; and the club-house with its bright chintzes, its history and romance, the faces of long-dead members of the Kit-Cat Club on the stairs, peering down at modern fashion. A dream of luxury and laughter that persisted as he sat between the well-

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dressed pair and watched the polo, subconsciously recording impressions of the gay scene, yet acutely aware of the girl beside him and each movement of her graceful head. Then, a sudden sense of loss as she rose, with a glance at the strolling crowd behind them, smiled at Miss Bellace and slipped away for "a word with Pierrot."

Torquil was left alone with the simpering chaperon, waiting—for ever waiting. . . .

How she talked, that foolish woman! He found himself urging her at last to be careful of the "treacherous wind," suggesting a walk as the cure. No sign of Fiammetta. They made their way through the crowd to tea. To his question regarding her strayed charge, Miss Bellace returned a trustful answer that completed his measure of contempt. Fiammetta was perfectly safe with Monsieur de Lusignan. A charming man—did Torquil know him? Attached to the French Embassy. So witty and agreeable, a splendid dancer, in great request.

Tea—a futile *tête-à-tête,* Miss Bellace agitated because the spout of the tea-pot was broken. "A pity—such a pretty pattern!" And Torquil didn't "take sugar?" That was sad, when you could get it. All the time his eyes wandered searching for a petaled hat, the brim licked by little flames. If only he could get rid of this artificial, deluded virgin nibbling cress sandwiches with porcelain teeth under sunken lips. What had Nan said about her? That "the Sacrifice" was "jolly useful to Fiammetta. Took on the men she didn't want and consoled them!" Torquil shuddered. Didn't want? That was the sting. He was there to amuse the chaperon. If only he could escape from her?

When they left the table he found his chance. Some one said: "My *dear* Euphemia! I *thought* I caught sight of you just now! Isn't it a *perfect* day?"

He was off with a grateful glance at a stout lady dressed in purple whose eager, protruding eyes boiled over the edge of a feather ruffle disguising her double chin. Her words came out in little pants, like steam from a heated kettle:

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"And where is—our fair—Fiammetta?"

Where indeed? Torquil headed instinctively away from the crowd, across the lawn to a glimmer of water. He came to the bridge that spans the lake, avoided a youthful couple, obviously bent on flirtation, embarking in one of the boats, and strode on, seeing beyond a chance of the solitude he craved. He must be alone and think. He turned to the left along a track used by golfers, skirting the water, crossed a little gully and found himself in a sparse grove of trees. Suddenly a glimmer of pink caught his eye. He stopped dead. Below him, in a punt drawn up to the bank and partially screened by a copper beech, was Fiammetta, stretched at her ease, her head sunk in a cushion, her face turned to her companion whose shoulder was touching hers. She had taken off her gloves—they lay across the man's knee—and was trailing her fingers through the water. They were not talking. Torquil knew full well that dangerous silence. From behind the trunk of a tree he scrutinized Pierre de Lusignan.

He had that tense yet graceful look which marks so many of his race. Virile but slender, he might have been a rapier made of polished steel. She would strike sparks from him but meet with a subtle resistance. He would bend before her, but never break: a man versed in the ways of her sex, a lover *par excellence.*

Languidly she lifted her hand and shook the drops of water off it, then held it sideways to her companion. He smiled, drew out his handkerchief and wiped those slender, pink-tipped fingers. She did not thank him—not in words. Instead, she laid the palm lightly against his lips. Torquil saw the man's head go down in sudden passion, mouth pressed to that satin cup.

He could bear no more. He turned and fled through the trees into the open, stumbling, the rough grass under his feet, in mad revolt and jealousy. He wanted to kill them both; to hold her, dead, in his arms, his face pressed to her bruised lips. This was what he had always feared. To be at the mercy of his body, no longer master of his soul.

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He had no idea of time or direction. He surged on, breathless, unseeing. Suddenly he was brought to his senses by a hoarse shout. He paused, bewildered.

"Fore!" The distant voice cracked and a small white object whistled past him, so close to his head that he recoiled. It was a golf-ball. Presently a youthful caddy panted up, shouldering a heavy bag and warned Torquil off the course with a fluent impertinence.

He found shelter near a hedge and subsided on the root of a tree. Slowly his brain cleared. He looked down at the watch on his wrist and saw that it was close on six. That was the time fixed for departure. If he was going back in the car, he must make his way to the Club steps. He fought for a moment with the desire to escape then and there, but his pride was involved. He would never let her see he cared.

Oh, the misery of that drive home! Pierre de Lusignan on the seat beside him, facing Miss Bellace, chatting to her in his witty fashion. He hardly glanced at Fiammetta, who lazily regarded Torquil from under her half-closed lids; Torquil, trying in vain to follow the Frenchman's elegant example. Once, after a long silence, she asked him about his writing. When was a new book coming out? This gave him his chance. He let her know the full extent of his success, with a trace of his old arrogance. She was interested.

"I must get it."

"No," said Torquil. "I'll send you a copy." He looked her straight between the eyes. "As a souvenir of a very pleasant afternoon."

"Do." Calmly, she smiled at him. "Though I didn't see much of you. I fell among friends and when I escaped I found that the Sacrifice had lost you. That's always the way at Ranelagh."

He lied boldly:

"I came across a man I knew—a college friend. I'm afraid we forgot the time."

At the corner of Church Street, they dropped him. The

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Frenchman was dining with them. This was the bitterest pill of all: to leave his rival in possession.

It was over. Never again would he look into that faultless face. She had betrayed his trust in her. He turned to work, the mighty consoler. But even his work failed him. He had lost the power of concentration and all interest in his story. What a mockery to write of love. There was no love, only passion—futile jealousy and despair.

"Deuce! Well-played!" The boy's keen voice rose from the lawn beneath Torquil's window. There followed the sting of the racket, volleying a high ball. "*My* advantage!" Then "*Damn!*" in a girl's vexed soprano.

Torquil's bitter lips twisted. The world had gone mad. It was ruled by women who swore, smoked, outran the men in every conceivable folly and vice. This was what the war had brought; Armageddon that was to herald the reign of a new Saviour. In the distance, the steam-crane hummed in a rising crescendo, aggravating his worn nerves. He pushed back his chair and rose from the table. He must get out, escape from this room and find relief in rapid movement. As he picked up his hat, his eyes fell on a copy of his book. He had promised to send one to Fiammetta. He hesitated. Yes, he would leave it. Otherwise his neglect might look like pique. He took up his pen and wrote inside a stereotyped phrase, signing it. He could tramp across the Park, hand it in, then take a bus to Hampstead and the open heath and satisfy his longing for air.

As he passed up Fulham Road, he caught sight of himself in a mirror in a wood-carver and gilder's window. How haggard he looked! There were new lines round his mouth and the peculiar pallor that an olive skin acquires under the stress of emotion. He might have been forty, he decided. It was Fiammetta's fault. She had robbed him of his youth. He hated her. She was a wanton. The word was a relief to his feelings. He felt he had dealt her a secret blow. Words—there was a magic in words. Of late they had deserted him. She had slain his inspiration. He would leave his book—a visible act of the last link

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snapped between them—and take up his old life, his fight for success, freed from her spell.

Fate willed otherwise. He had rung the bell of the high, white house when the door burst open and Nan emerged, followed by Pierre de Lusignan.

"Hullo! It's *you!*" She laughed at Torquil. "We thought you'd vanished into space. Haven't seen you for ages." Over her shoulder, she called back, "Fiammetta, here's Torquil!"

"I can't stop," he said quickly. "Just leaving this." He held out his book. But a voice came over the banisters:

"Tell him to come up."

He was aware of Lusignan's amused smile, of a sense of perfection about his well-dressed, graceful figure, and of Nan's alert, mischievous eyes. He lost his head and moved forward; anywhere to escape from this close scrutiny.

"He's coming," Nan sang out. "Good-bye, Torquil. Don't forget we're always at home on Sundays. There's a taxi, Pierrot!" She ran down the steps.

Some one closed the door behind him and the footman—whom he recognized as the man who had ordered him off the carpet in that far-away dream night—was piloting him up the stairs.

Baffled and furious, he found himself in a lofty room—the strangest he had ever seen. The floor was stained red and polished; a Pompeian red that matched the tone of the surrounding walls as high as the frieze, which was copied from a famous one in the Naples Museum, where nymphs and fauns danced before a chariot drawn by a pair of panthers. The ceiling and the curtains were black. A great couch ran across one side of the room, piled up with red cushions, and in the centre was a bust, on a high pedestal, dominating the empty space.

Intrigued, he approached it, to find that it was roughly made in plaster; of Bacchus, ivy-wreathed, with his sensual, gloating smile. The plinth was of cardboard and wood, painted to resemble marble. Amidst the refined costliness of the few pieces of furniture flattened against the walls,

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it looked grotesque and meretricious. He was still staring at it when the folding doors on his right slid apart and Fiammetta appeared in the opening.

"Admiring my dancing-partner? X—— made it for me, a birthday present!" She mentioned carelessly the name of a famous sculptor. "It's the gem of my 'properties.'" She advanced, swathed in a black cape, the tasselled end thrown over one shoulder. He recognized it at once, an unforgettable part of that first, moonlight vision. "How are you?" She extended a hand, revealing an arm bare to the shoulder that gleamed like marble, slender but rounded. "I've been dancing. I didn't wait to change. I guessed you had brought me your book."

He held it out without a word. From beneath the edge of the sable wrap he could see her feet, exquisite and bare as her arms, in golden sandals. Round her head was a wreath of vine-leaves, with a cluster of purple grapes on either side that swung over her little ears. A faint colour was in her cheeks, the result of exercise, and her eyes to-day were a limpid blue.

"Sit down." She waved him to the couch, standing before him and turning the leaves of his book in her hand, interested. "I thought you had forgotten it."

"No. I've been busy." His voice was husky. His eyes followed her moving fingers, seeing them pressed to his rival's lips. He was suffering abominably.

She glanced up and was struck by his pallor.

"You've been working too hard. You look worn-out."

The unexpected sympathy, together with the power of suggestion, acted on his strained nerves. A wave of giddiness swept across him. He put up a hand to his head; the red floor swayed up and down. Was he going to faint? This was the limit! Her voice reached him from far away.

"You're ill? Lean back and rest. Another cushion—that's it! You'd better have a glass of wine?" She was moving away to the bell, but he checked her.

"It's nothing." He set his teeth. "The heat—and I walked rather fast." Mortified, he tried to straighten him-

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self and force a smile. "Idiotic of me. I'm all right."

"Sure?" How gentle and sweet she looked, a faint pucker between her brows. "I know so well how you feel." Did she? He studied her wistfully, as she ran on, giving him time to recover. "I go full tilt at things, too, and then, suddenly I collapse. When that Masque was over, I was dead to the world! That's the price one pays for success. Still, it's worth it, isn't it, Torquil?"

"Yes." He was feeling better. Her words acted as a tonic.

"Don't move!" She sat down beside him, forestalling his attempt to rise. "And it was a success. Did you see the picture of it in the *Tatler?* There was a fine one of Nan. She's coming on in her dancing. We're getting up a new show. I'm sure one of the scenes would amuse you. It's called *The Temptation of Pussyfoot.* I'm a Bacchante. I worship Bacchus—we were rehearsing it just now—then in comes Pierrot as 'Pussyfoot.'" Torquil winced, unnoticed by her. "Such a lovely get-up! Can you picture him, with a goatee beard like Uncle Sam, in stars and stripes, with absurd high boots made of cat-skin? He pads about, 'pussyfooting,' and tries his hardest to convert me. Nan joins us, as a cellar-maid, carrying bottles under her arm—from a private cellar, *bien entendu,* of some American millionaire—and between us Pussyfoot succumbs. He kneels at the feet of Bacchus and pours out a libation whilst I crown him with my vine-wreath! It's sure to bring down the house." She laughed. "The moral is excellent, too. It shows the weakness of the scheme; a loophole left for the richer classes whilst the poor man is robbed of his beer. You must come and see it. I'll send you a ticket." Her feet tapped on the floor. "If only there was some one to play, I'd show you the opening dance now. I wonder"—She stood up. "Would it amuse you, without the music?"

"Very much." He caught at the straw. Anything to give him time to pull his scattered wits together and to beat a retreat with dignity.

He watched her move away from the couch, unwrap the

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cloak from her figure and fling it carelessly into a corner. He gasped. Was it possible?

She stood there, supremely indifferent, clad in a short purple tunic, the colour of the grapes in her hair, caught under the small, firm breasts by a girdle of dull gold. One shoulder was bared, without the pretence of a strap, the folds looped up on the other from which a flexible dappled skin, to resemble a leopard's, hung suspended. Beneath the hem gleamed her limbs, naked, perfect as a statue's. As she moved on her arched, sandalled feet, he could see the smooth curve of her knees.

She danced—like that—with the man called Pierrot? Every line of her supple figure exposed to a mixed audience, white arms above her head, a faint smile curving her lips. The blood pounded in Torquil's temples. He was shocked to the depths of his soul. With his ignorance of modern dancing on the music-hall stage and the laxity of the fashions in woman's dress—so marked since the war—it seemed to him to embody a supreme disregard for decency. But it went deeper even than that. She had added the last disillusion. She stood revealed, no longer divine but a temptation of the flesh, deliberate and provocative.

He hated her. He would not watch the grace of that pagan dance. He felt his strength come flooding back. He was saved, on the brink of utter subjection. And suddenly it occurred to him that he could repay her conduct in kind and wipe out that day at Ranelagh by an equally brutal indifference. The desire for revenge was augmented by the memory of an earlier insult. She was Lyddon's adored sister, proud as the man who had scorned Torquil. She should see that he could ignore her power. He sank still deeper into the cushions and deliberately closed his eyes.

Over the polished floor he could hear the patter of light feet, and feel the stir of the air as she passed him. He drew deep, even breaths, feigning sleep, motionless. Suddenly there came a silence. He pictured her on tiptoe, amazed; checked in her rapid movement, like a dryad, aware of a satyr's step. She was drawing near. His heart thudded.

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Now, she was bending over him. A faint scent from her hair stole across his troubled senses.

"Asleep?"

He heard her whisper the word. He waited, his muscles taut. Lower she stooped. Her quick breath fanned his cheek. Against his will, every pulse in his body quivered. He took a grip on himself, aware of overpowering danger. Was she insulted—he dared to hope so—or merely curious and amazed? Neither. His senses in a whirl, he felt the softest lips in the world touch his and cling for a moment. The next, she was gone, with a flutter of garments and the noise of the closing door.

He sat up, clutching the edge of the low couch, dazed and shaken.

She had kissed him! Of her own free will, believing him to be asleep. It meant—— Good God, what *did* it mean? She loved him—returned his passion. But then, Pierre de Lusignan?

Torquil smiled, in sudden triumph. To the Frenchman, she had vouchsafed her hand, a royal and imperious favour. To Torquil, she gave her lips. All his vanity bubbled up. Fiammetta—Lyddon's sister! Time had planned this revenge. His imagination rioted. Never did it occur to him that she had seen through his pretence; that the action had been prompted by a sudden perverse impulse, part punishment, part pity. Nor that sex had held a share in it; the excitement of the dance with its pagan sensuousness and the sight of the unawakened dreamer with his cold young beauty, resisting her spell. A shepherd, asleep on Mount Ida. . . .

Gone was his ancient rancour, his horror of her scanty dress, his excruciating jealousy. She had stooped to him, the spring in her blood, stirred by the same call of youth. She was his—a success beyond his dreams.

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CHAPTER XVI

AMAZING, how a man could write with the memory of those fresh young lips pressed to his in self-surrender. Unconscious of its truth to life, he stirred the Josephine of his romance from her long sleep of ignorance, her starry eyes alight with passion. This was what the story needed; the vivid climax of emotion. Now, he could write from experience. He raced on through that first warm night until the dawn stole in at the window, finding relief in expression, in a flood of words and rhythmic phrases. She had given him back his inspiration. Not Josephine, but Fiammetta.

He could see himself stealing out of her house, most blessedly unperceived, to be engulfed in the quiet park. The rest of the journey home was obscured. Only when he reached his rooms did he find, crushed in his hand, a grape that had fallen from her hair as she fled after her swift embrace. Out of the whirlwind of his emotions two points stood clear. She loved him; it must be a secret. He must not betray his inner knowledge of her conduct while he "slept." She was so delicately proud. It would be wiser to keep away for a little time to lull her fears. He set himself a definite span that would involve strenuous effort. He would finish his book first. It was like working for a prize!

But, beyond this, he saw clearly how much hung on his success. If he hoped to win her for his wife, he must have not only fame but fortune. Insensibly it altered the trend of his ambitions. His books must pay. He did not guess that he was standing at the cross-roads of his destiny; that debatable land where many an author halts wearied, to

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cry: "Is it worth while?" Worth the effort of plodding on, in the attempt, so often futile, to express the best that in him lies.

He knew that, frequently, great writers in their life-time were faced with poverty, adverse criticism and a meagre captious public, to achieve fame after death. It meant constant self-denial. What was it Merriman had said? "If you want to be respected, one book a year is quite sufficient."

Arkwright had debated the point, had argued that Merriman was old-fashioned. A good old house, but past its prime. He had also suggested that Kerin's death would be a blow to its "crumbling finances." Kerin had stuck to Merriman, had been "better paid than most of his authors!" A great mistake to cut down terms and rely on ancient methods in these days of changed values. He quoted, as an instance, the "thirteen to a dozen" convention. Obsolete! Arkwright had dropped it long ago; a royalty on every copy. Authors must live, and a clever writer should be well-treated; a man who "knows what the public wants." Modern stuff, true to life, if you like, but with a "snap" in it. Style wasn't everything. This war had slain artificial restrictions. Look at Llewellyn Rhyn, for example. Wrote the oddest mixture of slang and poetic rhapsody. But it went home; a clever trick. First impression, fifty thousand, mainly subscribed before publication. In America double that amount. There was success for you! A man who had never been to college, the son of a Welsh miner. Democracy was a good draw. Arkwright had read *An Outsider*, and enjoyed it. It must have paid Merriman well? Torquil, too. An eloquent pause. And the present book—going strong? He had smiled as Torquil explained. Waiting to see how the cat jumped before printing a third edition? Absurd! When printers were so busy. It only needed a fresh puff; a few clever advertisements to reawaken interest. That was Merriman all over! Penny-wise and pound-foolish. Getting a bit old, what? And nervous. No confidence in his authors.

Torquil had listened, nursing his grudge, yet jarred by

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some of his host's remarks. What a tradesman Arkwright was! He treated books like bales of cotton. Popularity was his goal; artistic merit nothing to him. Sales, followed by cheap editions.

Still, wasn't that what an author needed? A shrewd and capable middleman. He was sick of Merriman's advice; above all, of his criticism. One book a year? Ridiculous! How could a man marry on that? Round came his thoughts, full circle, to the passionate adventure. Who said there was no romance in life? She was Lyddon's sister. Incredible!

Slowly the sun gathered strength dissolving the night mists that floated across the grey roofs and turned the dew on the tennis-courts into myriad diamond sparks. Across the park in the still, white house, she would be sleeping, her burnished hair swept clear from her closed eyes, the silky lashes, tipped with gold, like a moth's wing, on her flower face. A sudden weariness overtook him. He would sleep, too, and dream of her. Yawning, he thrust his papers together, undressed and tumbled into bed.

The days passed in a frenzy of work. At last, late one Saturday night, he wrote the final line of his book and added those blesséd words, "The End." It was done; he had kept his vow.

Sunday afternoon saw him ringing the bell of the Park Lane house, nervous yet triumphant. A fine drizzle veiled the streets, silver, shot through by gleams of sunshine that touched the red granite of the fountain at the entrance to Hertford Street, and shone on the wet bronze figures, redeeming their squat ugliness. The memorial seemed to Torquil very British in its conception of art tempered by utility, made to withstand time and weather. He started; the door had opened.

A minute later, his heart leaden, he was walking away from the house. He had been prepared to hear she was out, but "out of town" was another matter, less easy to remedy. He had asked for the date of her return. It seemed to him that the manservant's face had become both reproving and

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malicious in replying that it was "uncertain." A horrible word, Torquil decided. Aimless, he reached Piccadilly. Then he suddenly thought of the Considines. Nan might have later news. He returned his steps to Chesham Street.

Lady Mary was at home. He followed the old butler up the dingy staircase into the room suggesting a stud-farm for chairs. His hostess was dispensing tea to a small circle of visitors; four middle-aged ladies, a stout priest and a thin old gentleman who drifted round handing a battered filigree dish containing some tired-looking cakes. There was no sign of Nan, or of any other youthful member of Lady Mary's family.

She greeted Torquil absently, gave him some tepid tea and introduced him to his neighbour as, obedient to her gesture, he gingerly took a chair. At least, she murmured the lady's name. It was evident she had mislaid his own. The effect was null, for the lady smiled and immediately resumed a broken-off conversation with the suave and attentive priest. Torquil sat and balanced his tea-cup.

A fresh caller was announced and absorbed into the little circle with friendly signs of interest. Torquil, exasperated, caught the words "your book," looked up and met the new-comer's eye. The glance, intercepted by Lady Mary, seemed to awaken in her a sense of the young author's isolation. She introduced the pair of men with a vague remark about Torquil's writing, alluding to the latest arrival as "my cousin, Sir Desmond Freke."

So this was the famous diplomatist whose memoirs Merriman had published. Torquil grasped at the slender thread and explained that he only wrote novels. He found himself presently involved in a one-sided conversation regarding the vices of publishers and the small chance an inexperienced author stood in their clutches.

Sir Desmond, having seen his book at his clubs and conspicuously topping others on the tables of his intimate friends, was convinced of Machiavellian errors in the accounts sent in to him.

Just look how the book had been reviewed? It has been

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called the "success of the season" by a well-known literary journal. Then *why* didn't it make money?

Torquil, wisely, sympathized but withheld the obvious explanation of the narrow circle to whom it appealed and its prohibitive cost; also the fact that Merriman was his own publisher. He was getting rather bored by the great man's laboured complaints when the door opened to admit another pair of elderly ladies, in their wake a son of the house, that youth whom Nan had called "Billy." With a quick glance at the company, Billy slipped round to the back of his mother's chair and watched her pour out a cold, straw-coloured mixture into an empty cup.

"You want fresh tea, don't you, Mum?" he suggested. "I'll ring."

Torquil caught his eye and forestalled him.

"Is this the bell?"

Billy nodded.

"Thanks." A gleam of recognition appeared suddenly in his face. "How're you? Nan's away—down at Talgarth," he volunteered, placing the author as one of his sister's intimates.

"With Miss Lyddon?" Torquil asked quickly.

"Yes." Billy drew nearer. "Having a top-hole time. I was there until Friday night. A jolly crowd, rehearsing all day for a show they're getting up, and dancing all night. No end of sport."

"When is Miss Considine returning?"

Billy's brown eyes twinkled.

"Lord knows! I expect she'll stick on until Fiammetta comes back. Talgarth's got leave—is expected to-day—so she turned most of us out. I never saw such a pair. More like lovers than brother and sister. She's only keeping Nan on—and Lusignan, of course."

"Why 'of course,'" thought Torquil. A stab of jealousy shot through him. He tried vainly to imitate Billy's cheerful, inconsequent manner.

"They're not engaged, are they?" he asked, as lightly as his voice permitted.

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"Not much! Pierrot's married. Got a wife tucked away somewhere in *la belle France*. They don't hit it off, I believe. Anyhow, she bars England and gives her husband a free hand. He's one of the fair Fiammetta's *fidèles*."

Married? Torquil's face cleared. Billy, relieved to find a man of his own age among what he called "the Sabbath crowd," drew him slightly to one side and went on with his description of the doings at Talgarth Castle.

"Ever been there?"

"No," said Torquil. "Though I know Miss Lyddon."

"And 'the Sacrifice'?" Billy's eyes twinkled. In Torquil's came an answering gleam. He nodded, and Billy encouraged, ran on: "Had a great rag the second night, at the poor old girl's expense. Jake Trevelyan turned up unexpectedly. Know Jake? Tall chap in the Blues."

"By sight." Torquil remembered the youth with the laughing face who had been Fiammetta's partner when she danced at the Hyde Park Hotel.

"Well, we kept it dark from Miss Bellace. One of the footmen had left and the man expected to fill his place failed at the last moment. We rigged up old Jake to wait at dinner. Pierrot did it—jolly clever! A wig and a few touches of paint, a perfect disguise in candle-light. He got through all right and 'the Sacrifice' had no suspicion until dessert, when Jake suddenly settled himself on the arm of Fiammetta's chair, stretched out an arm, collared a peach and remarked cheerily: 'D'you mind peeling this, old dear?' Tableau! The Sacrifice nearly fainted. Funniest thing I ever saw!" He chuckled. "There was old Clewer—the butler, who's been there a hundred years—choking behind the screen, Jake, with an arm carelessly thrown round Fiammetta's shoulders, and Miss Bellace, erect and trembling, demanding that he should 'leave the room!'" He laughed again at the recollection.

"Very amusing," said Torquil with a rather forced smile. In his mind he could picture Fiammetta in close proximity to the young guardsman, cool and collected, enjoying the joke, Jake's hand on her bare shoulder.

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"Oh, that's nothing"—Billy grinned—"to some of the rags we've had there. It's a great place, is Talgarth, even with Jinks at Cologne. Fiammetta keeps things humming. Here's the fresh tea. Like some?"

Torquil declined. He had to go. He made his adieux and escaped, to brood over Billy's disclosures. It wounded his vanity to think of the girl he loved out of his reach, amusing herself with other men. He felt lonely, outside it all. She lived in a different world, of confused principles and values, diametrically opposed to Torquil's. His early mistrust of society and the class Lyddon typified—he clung to the old hated name—returned fourfold and warred with his passion. Did she love him? Or was it a mirage, built up by him from the shifting sands of passion and imagination? Would she ever be content to settle down as his wife—the wife of a man of doubtful birth, with no tradition or fortune behind him? Would Lyddon, when he knew, permit it? For the first time Torquil realized all he was up against.

Thank Heaven, Lyddon was safe in Wales, with no chance of meeting Torquil, face to face, in the London house. It had been a narrow shave.

He shivered, aware of the drizzling rain and a chill in the evening air that added to his acute depression. If she loved him, if he were sure of that, no power on earth should separate them. And hadn't she given him the proof in that unsolicited caress? Faith and hope stirred from their torpor and answered the spur of imagination. On the grey canvas of the streets rose scenes, vivid in line and colour; of Torquil defying Lyddon, tasting the sweets of revenge—Torquil, as famous in his calling as the old diplomatist left in that stuffy drawing-room. All hung on his success. Not only a literary, but a financial one. He thought of Arkwright and his smile when he spoke of Merriman. *Autres temps, autres mœurs.* Arkwright would make his books *pay*.

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CHAPTER XVII

JOSEPHINE was snipping off the heads of the over-blown roses in the bed on the south side of the lawn when she heard her husband's unfailing signal, the distant note of the motor horn. Hurrying across the grass, she reached the house in time to see the car draw up at the door.

Merriman got out heavily. Josephine's first anxious glance noted the tired lines round his mouth and the weariness he strove to hide.

"Well, my dear?" He stooped and kissed her. "I see you've had no rain here though in town we've indulged in thunderstorms." He gave an order to the chauffeur and moved on through the hall. "I've brought news—both good and bad. The good first. I've let the house."

"No? How splendid! It's really settled?"

He nodded.

"The lease was signed this morning. We're country cousins. You look the part!" He smiled down into her sweet face under the cotton sun-bonnet that matched her lilac overall, from the big pocket of which protruded a loose strand of raffia.

"I've been gardening." She hesitated and added with assumed lightness, "And the bad news, darling?"

He shrugged his shoulders and looked away.

"I have to go up to town to-morrow."

"Must you? When you promised to rest!" Suddenly she guessed his evasion. "That's not all. You're hiding something?"

"It will keep. I'll tell you after dinner. It's nothing for you to worry about—just business. Take me round the garden first. That will blow away the cobwebs."

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"In a second—I want a word with Matthews." She slipped away on her errand.

When she returned she found her husband busy in the dining-room. He looked up guiltily.

"I'm making a cock-tail, for the gardener! To say nothing of myself. Here you are." He handed the glass. "Is it all right?"

"It's delicious."

"You've hardly tasted it," he protested.

"I spoke out of the fullness of faith!"

He gave her a whimsical glance.

"I only hope it's justified. I begin to question my own judgment."

"Why?" Over the rim of her glass, she smiled at him as she drank. "Nothing wrong with this!" she laughed.

"No." He had followed her example. "I think I shall give up publishing and start an American bar in its place. More money in it!"

"Do, and take me on as bar-maid." She tucked a hand through his arm. "Now, come and see my Rayon d'Or—I'm really proud of my roses—or play Romeo to my Juliette." She drew him out into the garden, across the grass to where her basket, with the sweetly-scented crushed petals, lay beside the long bed. "Look at that bud. Isn't it perfect? And this——"

He entered into her pleasure, following her as she moved on, exhibiting her favourite blooms, and feeling the peace of the quiet country lay tender fingers on his spirit. Although he was fond of flowers, he was not learned in gardening. This was Josephine's department and of late she had taken an active share, cutting down all extra help—a secret economy.

Merriman's spirits began to revive.

"Let's have a look at the vegetables," he suggested presently. "They appeal to the baser side of me. Shall we have peas to-night?"

"We shall. And our own new potatoes. Aren't you glad you're a country squire?"

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"I am. Westwick's our real home." He drew a deep breath of the evening air. "I can smell the sweet-briar hedge. Yes, I love this place. I've never regretted the day you persuaded me to buy it."

"Did I?" Her face was pensive.

He nodded, with a teasing smile.

"Because there were five steps leading up to Sister Ann, and five was your lucky number. A woman's reason—most conclusive!"

"Well, wasn't I right?" she retorted. "Haven't we been lucky here?"

"More than that." He pressed her arm. "Luck comes and goes—is full of deceptions. Happiness is more steadfast. We've *lived* here—enjoyed the moments. The best moments of my life. Thanks to you." His voice softened. He watched her bend down, break a twig off a straggling bush and fasten it in his buttonhole. "What's that?"

"Rosemary. For remembrance of our happy hours. A symbol of gratitude." She saw his face cloud over.

"Gratitude is out of fashion." He started as a distant vibration reached his ear, and glanced at his watch. "Why, that must be the second gong."

"There wasn't a first." She looked mischievous. "I told Matthews to forget it. You looked so tired and I don't believe in being a slave to convention. Certainly not in the country. In town, of course, you *have* to be smart, to interest your lady authors!"

Merriman gave a chuckle. It was an old joke between them.

"Touché! How did you know that I gave Marion Cass lunch to-day? It was to celebrate the success of her last book. She's coming on again finely." He smiled. "It was rather funny, my dear. I took her to the Café Royal and Arkwright sat at the next table. Still"—his voice had hardened—"he scored in the end."

Josephine looked up quickly at the bitter note in the last words.

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"How?" A sudden presentiment seized her. "Oh, Richard, *not* Torquil?"

"You've guessed it." He closed the door in the wall that cut off the kitchen garden. "But we won't go into it now, old lady. I'm fed up with the whole affair. After dinner."

They moved on. Under her breath Josephine murmured: "It's abominable!" and relapsed into silence. Her face was set. As they passed the seat in the sheltered bay by the drawing-room window, it evoked a memory of the night when she had sat there with Torquil and her early mistrust of her guest which later had given place to pity. She recalled a part of that moonlight confession in which he had spoken of his mother, left in ignorance of his existence. In his resolution to cut adrift from the sordid surroundings of his childhood, he had never paused to consider her feelings, but had sacrificed her to his ambition. A climber—Heron had been right—accepting all and giving nothing, she thought with a growing indignation. That "something lacking" which Merriman, despite his respect for Torquil's brains, had divined in his new author was human generosity. He grudged success in all around him and this spite lay at the root of his contempt for modern work and his pose as a lover of the classics.

The scales were falling from her eyes. She thought of his swift, boastful allusion to the Considines and their "kindness." He would use them and pass on, as he had used Josephine, mounting the social ladder until—— She gazed into the future. Would he overreach himself. What was it Heron had said? "A man so self-centred brings down on himself the wrath of the gods."

It was true. In the moment of disillusion and of anger on her husband's behalf, she prayed that Torquil might learn the lesson that what a man sows he reaps, that even success might prove barren shorn of human sympathy.

Little she guessed that, away in London, Torquil at this very moment sat at his upper window, tortured by the indifference of the girl who had stirred his passion, watching

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the light die out of the sky, emblematic of his hopes. That he knew now what it meant to wait for a sign to break the suspense—as his mother had waited these many years—his calls ignored, his letters unanswered. Fiammetta had forgotten him.

Had Josephine known, it would not have altered her merciless summing-up. Like many gentle, unselfish people there was a limit to her forbearance which, once passed, meant a definite rupture. Across the polished dinner-table she could measure the effect on Richard of this last unexpected blow which had followed so swiftly on Kerin's death. Behind his attempt to be calm and cheerful, he was struggling with a sense of failure. He knew that he had been weak with Torquil, yielding to the young man's charm in the early days of their acquaintance. He should have held out for a longer agreement. Friendship had tripped him up.

All this he explained to his wife at dessert when the maid had left the room. He was glad at last to unburden his heart.

"What makes me so wild is the way he did it. I see now he was out to quarrel." Merriman frowned as he spoke. "He offered me the new book but made a point of its being published within a given period—far sooner than I approved. I think he believed I should make an objection—we had already discussed the point—but I met him halfway, remembering your warning concerning his lunch with Arkwright. From this we passed to the question of terms. I was prepared to raise his present royalties but he asked for a big advance as well, a sum that was ridiculous. It would have meant a dead loss even if his sales had doubled. As a matter of fact I was out of pocket over Torquil's first book and only made it up on the second. I explained all this and showed him the figures. Torquil took offence. He threw Arkwright in my teeth and the sums he paid his authors and hinted that I was old-fashioned. You could see he'd been well-primed. He quoted certain innovations which Arkwright employs as a lure." Merriman sneered

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and filled up his glass. "Well—to cut the story short—he wouldn't listen to rhyme or reason. He's not at his best in a temper. There's bad blood somewhere."

Josephine smiled. Her eyes agreed with her husband, but her tongue was silent.

"Eventually," Merriman continued, "he flung out a definite accusation. I had 'neglected his interests' in the matter of a fresh edition of *The Self-made Man*—for which, at present, I can see no justification. According to him, a case of 'false economy.'" Merriman's voice grew bitter. "He seems to forget that I advanced his fare to Les Lecques, where he stayed for six weeks, as my guest, without its costing him a penny. But, of course, I didn't allude to that. It's over. Torquil has left me. We parted—without shaking hands."

Josephine's eyes flashed.

"I think you're well rid of him! He's treated you like he treated his parents." She stopped dead, biting her lip. Even in her deep resentment, she would not betray a confidence.

Merriman made no response. He was following out a train of thought. There was pain as well as annoyance on his heavily-lined face.

"I shouldn't care—not so much, at least—if I hadn't been fond of the boy." He said the words under his breath. "He told me he couldn't feel tied down to more than two books—a nervous fancy—and I let him off the third, a part of my original offer. I think he was fooling me then!" He laughed, but with a hollow sound. "Even now I respect his talent. He'll succeed. Up to a certain point. Not beyond—not in Arkwright's hands. Conceit is forgivable in youth, but as a man grows older it's apt to undermine his reason. Arkwright's a bad influence. He'll flatter Torquil, snatch a profit and turn him down for a newer man. Well"—he drew a deep breath—"that's Torquil's concern. I've treated him generously—better than many of my authors—and he's shown me his appreciation. Let's go out to the garden?"

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Later, as they watched the stars emerge from the deep blue of the night and cluster about the church spire, Merriman gave a sudden chuckle.

"What is it?" Josephine asked, delighted at this evidence of a happier mood. "Tell me the joke?"

"I was thinking of a remark of Torquil's, referring to his first two books. You know the way he throws back his head, sticks out his chin, and looks aggressive when he wants to impress his audience."

"Yes. Well?"

She waited, amused.

"Adopting that attitude"—Merriman's old eyes twinkled—"he assured me that in ten years' time, the rights which I hold in his early novels would be on a par with Stevenson's. That's something to console me!"

"He *didn't?*" She laughed, with open scorn.

"Honour bright! It will show you his opinion of himself. The intention, of course, was to emphasize that I had profited throughout, secured his masterpieces cheap! Stevenson—good Lord!" He chuckled again. "I mustn't forget to tell Heron. He'd enjoy it. Well, I've known a good many authors—they're not modest as a class; they're creatures of moods and impulses and they lead an unnatural life, poised between the world of fact and the clouds of imagination, at high pressure, engrossed in themselves—but I've never met one to beat Torquil! He's the Napoleon of my collection."

"I'm thankful I'm not his Josephine!" The words slipped out thoughtlessly.

"So am I!"

Merriman laughed, but Josephine felt her colour deepen, and blessed the kindly darkness that screened the fact from her husband's eyes. The incident of the mad shepherd had leaped up into her mind and Torquil's accelerated departure. A faint dismay succeeded the thought. How had Torquil finished his book? What had become of the Josephine for whom she had been the unwilling model? She saw herself caricatured, yet still recognizable. She wished

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he had never crossed her path. Impulsively, she spoke aloud:

"I hate him!"

Merriman turned in surprise. Never in all their years together had he heard that vindictive ring in her voice. It was foreign to her gentle nature.

"You needn't. He'll meet his Waterloo." He slipped a hand through his wife's arm. "Come, my dear, it's time for bed and I can't have you worrying. There are other authors, besides Torquil. And he mayn't last. You can never tell."

She nodded her head, ashamed of her outburst.

"Yes. We'll go in." She rose from the seat. "Must you go up to town to-morrow?"

"Afraid so. I'd planned to stay and do a little work at home, but Stebbins asked for a day off. His sister is to be married, it seems. He's been kept pretty hard at work lately and I didn't like to refuse his request."

"On a Friday?" She was superstitious. "Fancy choosing such a day."

"To tell you the truth, I thought of that." Merriman smiled back at her. "I happened to see in the paper that there was a golf-match at his club—to do with the championship. Perhaps it's a case of a double event? Last year, his aunt died! It reminds me of an inscription I once saw on a votive heart, hung above an altar in France, which for sentiment and economy combined can hardly be beaten. 'On the success of my examination and the death of my grandmother.'"

Josephine laughed. As they reached the porch, Merriman asked her if she had seen anything of Heron lately.

"Not since Wednesday. Why? Do you want him? I believe he's going to town to-morrow."

"Is he? We could come back together and I could bring him home for dinner. If you're agreeable?"

"I'll try to be! Shall I send him a note in the morning?"

"Yes, first thing. Then we'll know."

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As they mounted the shallow staircase, Josephine noticed her husband pause half-way, to recover his laboured breath. He caught her anxious glance and smiled.

"A touch of asthma—that's all! Must have something at my age."

But his cheerfulness did not deceive her. He looked like a man who had suffered a shock; but she put down his changed appearance to the stormy interview with Torquil.

She warned Heron in her note next morning to say nothing about his fellow-author, giving him the facts of the case briefly, in confidence. She could trust to her friend's discretion and she watched her husband off with the feeling that he was in good hands, Heron, already fetched in the car, chaffing him over a new necktie.

"Try and come back by the early train?" she urged, waving from the porch.

"I'll bring him," shouted Heron, as they turned the corner into the lane.

Josephine felt comforted. The sun shone; dappled clouds drifted slowly across the sky and the earth had the delicious freshness that follows a heavy dew. All along the herbaceous border the bees were at work, and butterflies, in idle contrast, skimmed the flowers. Reluctantly she turned back to the house and settled down to her accounts and her secret effort to keep down expenses without curtailing Richard's enjoyment.

In the afternoon, Élise claimed her to try on a cotton frock. The maid was in a silent mood and her face had the sallow tinge that presaged a bilious attack. Josephine was very gentle, aware of this tendency in the Brittany woman's constitution and its effect upon her temper.

She praised the simple gown and added:

"You look as if you hadn't slept. You'd better lie down for an hour or two."

But Élise scorned the suggestion. It was nothing. Thunder, perhaps, in the air. A restlessness—did not Madame feel it? She pressed her hands to her temples. As Madame knew, she suffered at times from a *migraine.*

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Impossible to avoid it, but it did not interfere with her work! Up went her dark head with its sleek well-dressed hair. That—*jamais!* No one could say she gave in. It was not her habit. She darted a swift look at her mistress, touchy, longing for sympathy in her faithful soul, yet by her manner, suggesting that it would be an insult.

Josephine, nonplussed, fell back on the weather.

"Yes, I think we shall have a storm. Mr. Heron is coming to dinner. What shall I wear, Élise?"

The dark face relaxed slightly. Élise enjoyed being consulted but her pride was still in the ascendant. Madame "knew best what suited her."

Josephine repressed a sigh.

"My old black tea-gown then. Quite good enough if we sit in the garden."

She was amazed by the effect of this casual suggestion. The maid, folding the cotton dress on the bed, swung round, her hands clasped; a torrent of French poured from her lips. It was difficult to follow the outburst. Black? *Mon Dieu,* if Madame chose black, that was the end of everything! With a dream concerning a crocodile which, as every one knew, foretold disaster, and the pain in her head, who could wonder that her nerves were *agacés?* If Madame had no confidence in Élise, there was that pink-faced housemaid who would, *sans doute,* serve Madame better—and steal the lawn handkerchiefs! After ten years' loyal service! To be treated like this? *Juste ciel!* She gathered up her crumpled work, deaf to Josephine's remonstrance.

"Non, non! C'est fini! I take myself off! But Madame will remember I warned her. And to lock up the new camisoles."

Josephine laid a hand on her arm.

"Élise? Don't *add* to my troubles. I'm so dreadfully worried about your master."

The woman gulped, her passionate eyes meeting the steady grey ones, her hysterical temper almost spent.

"If Madame still finds me of use——?" She brought it out with a sob.

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Suddenly Josephine remembered that she had praised the housemaid that morning. This *crise* was due to jealousy; the bitter flower whose root is love. All the years of loyal service rose up before her. Impulsively she stooped and kissed that ravaged face.

"Why, I couldn't get on without you," she cried.

The next moment two bony arms came round her convulsively. Then Élise stepped back, appeased and repentant, the tears running down her cheeks.

Madame must pardon her. She had thought of late—but no matter! And then the dream, which had upset her. And a sense of oppression, of trouble coming. It arose, doubtless, from *"l'estomac"?* Some camomile tea would put it right. And Madame would wear?

"Whatever you like!" Josephine smiled. "I'll dress now and get it over. Then you're to go and lie down. I can tell you have a splitting headache."

Élise, reluctantly, obeyed.

Sitting in the little pavilion, on the look-out for the car, Josephine pondered upon the mystery surrounding love. She had never known the dark side of that passionate possession which touches the boundary line of hate: the torture of jealousy to which the Latin race is subject. She felt weary, a little shaken, not only by the scene but by the maid's reiteration of her superstitious fears. Thank Heaven, David was now with Richard, bringing him home to the country peace.

From the trees overhanging the lane came the crooning note of a pigeon, then the clear call of a thrush, followed by the hushed silence that waits on the setting sun. A bat, still blinded by the light, swooped down so close to the opening that Josephine recoiled, startled, and caught its faint twittering cry. She stood there, looking up the road under the cool, green arch of boughs. Was that the distant throb of the car? She held her breath, listening. If so, when it reached the brow of the hill, Richard would sound the horn.

"Is anyone coming, Sister Ann?" she murmured, amused

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at her own folly. Far away, a sudden flash, the last gleam of the setting sun on bright metal rewarded her, with the vibration of the engine, and she leaned out eagerly. Where was the familiar signal?

Now she could see the car. She frowned, perplexed, for behind the chauffeur sat Heron, alone. Where was Richard? Her heart tightened; a sudden fear shot through her. On Heron's face was no welcoming smile, though his eyes strained towards Sister Ann. Before the car could slacken speed, she called to him anxiously:

"David! Where's Richard?"

"I'll explain." He jumped out as the chauffeur applied the brake. "Let me in through the side door." He turned to the man as she vanished. "Not a word to anyone at present. Remember, Morris?"

"Very good, sir. I'll be round at the garage, ready." The servant drove on, hastily, as his mistress appeared in the doorway, fearing to meet her eyes.

Heron drew her inside and closed the door before he spoke.

"Richard is not very well—not quite up to travelling. I thought I'd come back and tell you, so that if you felt anxious about him we could go up by the 9.15." He tried to smile, but his lips twisted.

Josephine made no response. He waited, prepared for anything but this strange silence on her part.

She came a step nearer to Heron, her grey eyes searching his.

"He's dead." Her voice was dull and calm. "You're only trying to break it to me."

"My dear——" He laid a hand on her arm and paused. What was the use of pretence? It would only prolong the agony. She would have to know, and since she had guessed it—— He nodded. "Quite peacefully. He didn't suffer. Thank God!"

She saw him gulp and the Adam's apple in his throat jerk up and down. It roused in her a strange wonder. Richard's never did that. But Richard was dead? Sud-

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denly, through her stunned senses, the shaft sped. He was gone—for ever! Her stay in life; the rock on which she had built her citadel of boundless trust.

"David!" Her frozen calm broke up. The next moment she was sobbing, his steadying arm around her shoulder, her face pressed to his rough coat sleeve.

He could find no futile words of comfort. He stood, staring into space over that bowed, beloved head, resolute in his control, in his final loyalty to the dead. Thank God she could cry like that—it was safer than her earlier mood —and that he had reached Westwick before that fatal telegram, despatched in panic from the office. He had saved her the initial shock. Resolutely he kept his thoughts on practical contingencies. At last, still shaken, she raised her head, to find a big handkerchief thrust into her trembling fingers.

"It's quite clean," said Heron simply.

"Tell me—everything, please?" With an effort, she choked back her sobs. "Truthfully?" In her wet eyes, he read a shadow of suspicion, the result of her strained nerves.

"Of course. Besides, there's nothing to hide. He was talking to the manager when he suddenly leaned back in his chair, gave a little gasp—and he was gone! The doctor, whom they fetched at once, said that nothing could have saved him. It was heart failure—instantaneous."

She nodded her head, wiping her eyes.

"I believe he knew, last night." Suddenly her shoulders stiffened. "Torquil did it. The final blow, on the top of Kerin's death. Oh, why *couldn't* he have waited?" The cry rang out bitterly. "Torquil—the failure—he couldn't bear it. Richard didn't *want* to live!"

"You're wrong." Heron spoke quickly. She had begun to sob again. He took her cold hands in his. "Listen to me for a moment, my dear. I didn't mean to tell you yet, but perhaps it may help a little. I suggested myself as a substitute for Torquil. That is—I'm putting it badly—I offered Richard my new book as we went up in the train

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this morning. I'd been thinking of it for some time. I've had trouble with my agent and I'm not bound in any way. I g-guessed"—he stammered—"it might please him. To have my work in the future. It—seemed to." He stopped dead, startled by Josephine's expression.

She was hanging on his words; the stars in her eyes shone through her tears.

"You did this? Because of Torquil. Of what I told you in my letter?"

"Not altogether. I'd several reasons." He lied badly, avoiding her gaze. "It was just a coincidence and——"

She interrupted his laboured speech.

"He didn't guess you knew about Torquil?"

"Of course not. Why should he?" All the inherent modesty of the man's fine, unspoilt nature rang out in his concluding words. "As I say, that altered nothing. Why, I wasn't even sure if he'd care to have me back."

The hands in his suddenly tightened. He heard her whisper "God bless you!"

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CHAPTER XVIII

THE first tidings of Merriman's death reached Torquil through the Sunday papers. The shock swept away his rancour and he felt an acute regret for his own precipitate action. He might have spared the dead man. Then the insidious thought followed that had he delayed matters he would have lost a potent lever in securing good terms from Arkwright. Yet his conscience pricked him. He thought of Les Lecques, of Merriman's early kindness to him, and of Josephine, now a widow.

A widow? Torquil frowned. In a sudden flash he saw himself stretched beneath the walls of Beaucaire above the swirling flood of the Rhône, watching a bough of almond blossom carried, helpless, on the current. Amazing to think that he had suffered, lying there, from the fact that Josephine was another man's wife! Only a few short months ago. He shrank from the obvious conclusion that man was a changeable animal and he no better than his fellows.

He told himself that experience of the world was broadening his outlook, enhancing the value he set on life. Josephine belonged to the past, to the days of doubt and poverty surrounding an unknown author, when her kindness had been a consolation. Fiammetta was rarely kind, but if he won her she would be the seal of the world set on his success. If? Everything hung on that word.

To-day he was in an arrogant mood, full of keen health and confidence. He had slept well, risen late and dressed himself with unusual care. The hot weather suited him. His eyes looked clear and his olive skin was warmed by the rich stir of his blood. He had a swift presentiment that the sunny day belonged to him, was lucky, and found him at his best. He was filled with a sense of life's adventure.

The mood carried him into the Park on the chance of a

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meeting with Fiammetta. As he moved up with the crowd, scanning the packed rows of chairs, he caught a distant glimpse of Nan and made his way to her side.

"Hullo, Torquil!" She laughed at him from under a shady hat that looked as if it were tired of the season and sympathized with her crushed frock. "Know Jake, don't you?" She glanced from him to her companion. "Move up, Jake, and make room for Torquil. That's right. What a hot chair!"

Trevelyan laughed.

"Sorry! Will you change places with me?"

"No, I'll bear it." Nan sighed. "I'm in a heavenly mood, aren't I? Listening to you drivelling on about Fiammetta's illness." She paused, and added impatiently, "All the same, I wish she'd buck up! We can't postpone that show for ever."

"Is Miss Lyddon ill?" Torquil's face gave him away.

Nan chuckled.

"Another of them? Oh, ye gods! Why wasn't I born red-headed? Here's Jake prowling about Park Lane with wilting roses all day long, and Pierrot full of strange oaths. And they all come to me for the latest news and expect me to sympathize! I would, if she were really ill, but it's only been slight influenza and she's tons better now. The Sacrifice is such a fuss-pot and, for once, Fiammetta seems to like it. Shuts herself up and refuses callers. *That's* not the way to get well."

"It's a jolly nasty thing," said Jake. "I had it in the trenches—this new sort—and I can tell you I very nearly pegged out. Didn't care a hang what happened."

Torquil drank in the news. Here was the simple explanation of Fiammetta's prolonged silence. Illness excused everything. His spirits rose at the thought and he smiled.

Nan glanced at him wickedly.

"Better? Cheer up, Torquil. 'No flowers, by request.'" Her eyes swept past him and she glowered from under the faded hat. "If that Ferriby woman comes here, sit tight, both of you. Here she is, with her wretched doglet." A

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tall woman, very well dressed with a tiny Yorkshire under her arm was making her way towards the trio. Nan whispered to Torquil, "If you give up your chair, I'll never forgive you. She's marked down Jake." The next moment Mrs. Ferriby had paused before them. "How do you do?" Nan said coolly, "Beastly hot, isn't it?"

"It *is* warm." In the drawling voice was a shadow of correction. Mrs. Ferriby disdained slang. "Oh, how do you do, Mr. Trevelyan?"

The unhappy victim made a movement to rise, but Nan deliberately interposed:

"Sorry there's no room here, Myra. How's Prink?" She put out a finger and touched the dog's silky head.

"Alas!" Mrs. Ferriby sighed. "Prink is no more. This is Blink."

"Another?" Nan looked disgusted. "Poor little chap!" For the wistful eyes that gleamed under the fine hair, bunched up and tied with a ribbon, had filled her with a sudden pity. "I don't believe you feed them, Myra."

Mrs. Ferriby looked plaintive.

"I do—don't I, my precious?" She fussed over the tiny creature and raised her eyes to Trevelyan's face. "I'm very unlucky with my pets."

"Perhaps you feed them too well?" he suggested.

"The brutal truth is," said Nan, "that when they don't go with the latest dress they're doomed. Isn't that a fact?" She grinned up at Mrs. Ferriby provokingly. "Removed from a luxurious muff, they peter out in a maid's cold bedroom. The moral of which is: Never become a lady's pet!" Her elbow which was touching Jake's emphasized the remark.

"You're very unkind. I shan't stop." Mrs. Ferriby looked mournful. It suited her dark, languid style, and she often adopted a tragic pose. Yet she lingered and glanced at Torquil. "Didn't I meet you with Miss Lyddon one day at Ranelagh?"

The author, in turn, made a movement to rise, but Nan laid a hand on his arm.

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"No good, Myra!" She laughed outright. "You're not going to sneak his chair. We had enough trouble to find these. There's Major Dace with one to spare in that row in front. Go and console him. Nothing like firmness," she added to Torquil as the tall woman moved away with a curious Eastern swing of her hips. "I loathe her! She's like a snake. I really believe she *eats* those dogs! Anyhow, I frightened her off." She turned to Trevelyan. "Say 'thank you?' "

"Thank you, darling."

Nan laughed.

"A pity she didn't hear that. Look, she's got hold of the Puffin! He's pleased, too, all his toes turned out. He'll ask her to lunch now. Funny how she gets fed. Never entertains herself—can't give you a cup of tea—but goes about looking superior and criticizing her friends' parties. Came to a dance we had last year and told Mum that the band was rotten. Cheek! I said, 'You must go one better.' But she didn't rise to the hint. What's the hour?"

Torquil told her.

"Lunch." She stood up and shook out her skirts with a rueful look at them. "About time *I* had influenza! I'm getting to the end of my clothes."

"*You're* all right," said Trevelyan.

Torquil saw the blood rush up under Nan's brown skin but she only mocked.

"Thanks, darling!"

"So I vote you come on with me to Prince's," Jake continued. "That suit you?"

For a moment Nan hesitated.

"All right. I'll talk Fiammetta!" She laughed with a touch of malice. Jake shrugged his broad shoulders.

"And you?" he said pleasantly to Torquil.

The author wisely refused to play gooseberry to the pair, pleading an earlier engagement. He parted from them at Hyde Park Corner and turned off up the Row. His thoughts swung back to Fiammetta; not the glowing creature of

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their drive, but delicate, with a wistful beauty. The fancy appealed to him. He would lose his secret fear of her, his dread of her mischievous intuition. He rejoiced at the thought of his lady enclosed, her door shut to her admirers; those men with their easy manners, careless speech, and sure knowledge of the world in which she lived. If only he could see her now, alone, in the weakness of depression. Surely his own vitality would quicken the spark of desire, dormant since the day she had danced? He would put it to the test and believe in the instinct that had led him for the first time to Church Parade, into that peacock crowd he despised. That Ferriby woman now, with her sensuous walk, roving eyes, and her air of aloof speculation? Greedy, brainless and critical, without passion—so he judged her—yet trading on the weakness of men. Beside her Nan, acquisitive, eager for pleasure, seemed strangely clean. Just a hungry schoolboy, out for adventure Yet at one time she had shocked him. Odd how his opinion changed. And worrying, on account of his work. As a hermit, his outlook on life had been free from these perilous fluctuations. He had seen it, far off, as a whole, with no fine shades of virtue and vice; an honest line drawn between them. Class, too, distinct from class. The misery of the working poor in a desperate struggle to escape the clutch of the capitalist, and the luxury of the idle rich in the vicious circle of their pleasures. Now, confusion had crept in. In his squalid lodgings in Pimlico it was easy to sympathize with the former, but in Fiammetta's strange house he was haunted by a doubt of his condemnation of the latter. Was he wavering in his principles, or merely growing more broad-minded? A pretty girl with blue-green eyes gave him a swift glance, in passing, that was a tribute to his manhood, and Torquil dismissed the problem, caught anew in the toils of his passion. For the eyes were the colour of Fiammetta's. To-day would decide his fate.

He felt strangely sure of this. So sure that when, four hours later, he stood on her doorstep, denied admittance, he refused to accept the servant's mandate.

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"I know she's been ill, but I think she'll see me. If you'll take in my name—Torquil." He brought it out with such assurance that the man hesitated, and at this moment the luck in which he so firmly believed turned the balance of the scales. For down the stairs came a rustling figure in black silk with a tight waist and a Royalty fringe, crowned by a toque; the Sacrifice in her Sunday best.

She peered out short-sightedly, seeing the young man on the threshold. Torquil pressed hurriedly forward, past the annoyed footman.

"Oh, Miss Bellace! How are you?" His hand shot out and captured hers—caught it in fact as a drowning man grasps at a passing spar. He ventured a discreet pressure. "I've called to inquire for Miss Lyddon. Is she better? Do you think she'd see me?" He smiled down from his great height into the chaperon's foolish face.

"Why, it's *you*," she fluttered. "I couldn't tell—against the light. Do come in. Yes, my poor darling, she's been so ill, but she seems to be on the mend now. Only so dreadfully depressed. I really hardly like to leave her. Though I've *promised* this afternoon to go to tea with a cousin who is only in town for the week-end. I wonder——" She gazed at Torquil.

"Don't wonder. Just let me go and sit with her until you return?" With an effort he controlled his voice, but behind the words, lightly spoken, was the full driving-power of his will. He could feel Miss Bellace wavering. "I'll cheer her up! I understand. You see, I've had influenza myself. Badly—I know what it means. You could be perfectly happy about her, and I'm sure you need a change. Nursing is anxious work."

"It is." She drank in his sympathy. What a very good-looking young man he was. And thoughtful. . . .

He saw he had won the day. The footman had vanished, with the conclusion that if anyone were to be blamed in the matter it should be Miss Bellace. Torquil glanced up the stairs.

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"It's the first door on the right, isn't it?" he asked gaily. "I know my way."

"On the left," she corrected, forgetting that she was facing him. "I don't know, I'm sure. She might be vexed. Perhaps I'd better ask her first?"

"No, you'll be late," said Torquil quickly. "I'll make it all right—take all the blame! You leave it to me." He was off, smiling. "Don't you worry. Have a good time." To his relief she acquiesced. As he reached the corner and turned to wave, he saw her, with an air of decision, gather up her black sunshade, lying on the hall table. Her high heels pattered across the squares of black and white marble. He was rid of her. Thank God! A wild excitement drove him forward. "First door on the left," he repeated, reaching the broad landing. "This must be it." He turned the handle and, his heart thumping against his ribs, walked boldly into the room.

At once his sense of colour warned him of his mistake. Instead of a riot of red, he was conscious of the peacock shade that seemed to belong to Fiammetta; of white fur rugs on a parquet floor and a great, gold bed with a satin cover embroidered heavily with dragons. They writhed, green and blue, and, across them, was the body of a girl, flung face downwards, arms outstretched in an abandonment of grief; motionless, save for a quiver that ran over the slender shoulders at intervals when she caught her breath.

Torquil stood, turned to stone, his eyes fixed on the great bed, with its gilded wicker work and carved supports held up by Cupids. He could see that her hands were clenched. On one was the turquoise scarab, though her dress to-day was violet-coloured. Details had ceased to count with her. The thought struck him painfully.

Fiammetta seemed unaware of his presence. Presently, she twisted sideways and a low cry broke from her lips.

"What shall I do? Oh, what shall I do? My God!" Then, with a sob, *"Jinks!"*

The single word snapped the spell that held Torquil.

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It was Lyddon then, who had brought this misery upon her. Lyddon—curse him! He moved forward.

"Fiammetta?"

She turned with a violent movement and sat upright. Her wet eyes were wide with horror. There were purple shadows under them; not a vestige of colour in her lips. For a moment she stared wildly at Torquil, then her mouth twisted.

"You!" She relaxed, leaning limply against the pillows.

"Yes." He knelt beside the bed. "Tell me what's wrong? Ah, don't cry!" For her hands had gone up over her face and he saw the quick rise and fall of her bosom. His words poured out incoherently. "You *must* tell me! *Please,* Fiammetta? You can trust me, can't you? You know I love you—that I'd die to save you any pain—that you're everything in the world to me. That—I don't expect you to love me. Only a little—just as much as when you kissed me. Yes, I knew. I've lived on the memory ever since. And you wouldn't have done it—you, so proud—unless you felt—unless you cared . . . something. And I can make you care more, if only you'll trust me, my darling? *Fiammetta!"* His face went down, burning, against her knees.

He felt her draw away from his touch, but he dared not look up. Above the beat of the blood pulsing in his ears he heard her voice, faintly amused:

"Are you asking me to *marry* you, Torquil?"

His intense fear of her mockery brought him suddenly to his feet.

"Why not?" His voice was vexed and husky.

"No." She seemed to consider the point. She drew up her feet under her and clasped her knees with her hands. A tear still hung on her long lashes and she shook it off impatiently. "Why not?" she said as if to herself. Her glance ran slowly over Torquil, a cool look that seemed to measure him in this new amazing light. She smiled faintly. "So you think yourself in love with me?"

"I don't think"—he scowled—"I know it."

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"Since when?"

"Since I stood one night, two years ago, outside your door and watched you pass to your car. Like a torch that flamed through the dark, red sparks about your feet."

"Really?" She looked interested. "Two years ago?" Across her face went a sudden sharp spasm of pain. She held out her hand to him. "Let's talk it over quietly, Torquil. Sit down—yes, on the *green* dragon. I never cared for that one. If I married you, would you let me go my own way in everything? I couldn't feel bound. I love my freedom."

"You mean it?" His strained eyes sought hers.

"Wait! I've not decided yet." She looked past him across the room to an exquisite sea-piece that hung on the wall; of great green waves rolling in on to a sun-bathed strip of sand. "I suppose I shall have to get married—some day. So why not now? It's a solution." She did not attempt to explain the word but her gaze came back to the man beside her. "I'm *tired*, Torquil." Her lips quivered. "I want to get out of all this. Away from this room and every one. Especially that green dragon!" She smiled with such infinite weariness that he felt a lump rise in his throat. "Miles away—somewhere abroad. If I'm shut up here any longer with the Sacrifice, I shall cut my throat."

"I don't wonder!" He nodded grimly.

The hand that lay in his tightened.

"You're rather a dear sometimes, Torquil."

He leaned nearer. She shook her head.

"Not yet. I want you to think first. It isn't a marriage made in heaven—just an earthly compromise. You mustn't indulge in wild dreams. No 'love, honour and obey.' But I think you and I could be good friends." She read the sudden fear in his eyes and smiled. "Oh, I'm not going to cheat you, Torquil. That sort of thing's all right in novels, but it never succeeds in real life. Only, I must be alone sometimes. You, too—with your writing. We must both feel free." She withdrew her hand. A faint colour swept into her lips. "To me it's the essence of existence.

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I should stifle in a prison. And marriage is that to many women. To lose one's personality—become a man's slave and mistress." She passed a hand over her eyes, shuddered and fell back. "It's nothing." Her voice sounded faint. "It will pass. I'm not—strong yet."

He hung over her anxiously, then glanced round the room in search of some restorative. But after a moment she straightened herself.

"Well?" She looked at him curiously. "Do you agree to my stipulation?"

"That you shall be free? Need you ask? I would agree to *anything*—if——" His voice broke. "You love me?"

Silently her lips shaped "No."

"But you will?"

Her expression puzzled him.

"How can I tell? What is love?"

"I'll teach you." Man's eternal boast.

Fiammetta only smiled.

"Then we'll be married next week."

"What?" He stared at her, aghast.

A low laugh broke from her lips.

"You're not a very ardent lover! I've known men pleased with less."

"It's not that." He was suddenly wordless. How could he explain to her that he lived from day to day, went short of a meal when money failed him or a cheque for a story was overdue?

In the class from which he had sprung, an engagement was a serious matter that frequently ran into years, whilst the man saw to his finances. Did she believe that he possessed a private income? He shrank from the thought of placing money before romance. How should he tell her? How explain? In his urgent need a verse rose up from its hiding-place in his author's brain. He remembered her love for De La Mare's poem.

"Listen!" He held her attention now. Sea-green grew

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her wonderful eyes, like the waves in the picture, as he quoted Yeats' haunting lines:

"Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half-light,
I would spread the cloths under your feet.
But I, *being poor*, have only my dreams.
I have spread my dreams under your feet.
Tread softly, because you tread on my dreams."

A light dawned in her face.

"'Being poor'? Is that the trouble? Why, I never think of money! Don't let's even talk of it. We're artists and we'll share, Torquil. You bring me all your golden words and I will supply baser coinage! A great man, you shall bring me your fame; I——" She stopped and her eyes fell. "I give you myself—such as I am! It's a risk, Torquil. You're blinded by passion, but I see clear. Never say, in the years to come, that I didn't warn you." Her voice faltered. Her hands were pressed in a sudden nervousness to her heart. Then she was caught up in his arms. With his mouth on hers he felt her shiver. In his folly he believed her his.

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PART III

THE VACANT COURTS

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CHAPTER XIX

TORQUIL stood at an upper window of the little house in Park Lane, gazing across at the bare branches of the trees opposite. It was his second winter there, yet he did not feel it to be his "home," the visible result of success. That old dream of boyish days had long since lost its magic. He smiled with a touch of scorn, his eyes fixed on the far pathway beyond the open Park gates. He could see himself standing there, looking up at these very windows, lost in visions of the future. The little house—a great author. . . .

Well, in a sense, he had succeeded. His sales testified to this. Yet, at moments, he felt a mistrust of his growing popularity. Although his work was more fluent it lacked the deep sincerity of his earlier and rougher attempts. And the house was Fiammetta's.

He would never have admitted it, but his position was akin to that of "the Sacrifice" in the early days of their acquaintance. He stood for conventional law and order, inwardly powerless to check his wife in one of her wild caprices. She was free, but he was bound; his money a mere drop in the ocean, his authority nil, his work her plausible excuse for evading his society.

In the eyes of the world their amazing marriage—with the sudden bomb-shell of the announcement on the day they started together for Norway—had proved a somewhat piquant success. Fiammetta was charming to Torquil in public, proud of his books—with a secret touch of mockery that galled his spirit—lavish in all concerning money. But under it lay indifference. He had never possessed her in the spirit; she moved on a different plane. Even in that

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first wonderful month of wandering by the blue fiords, she had acquiesced in his passion but met it with no answering fire. Torquil, bewildered, had blamed himself. In his ignorance of her sex, he saw in his wife's attitude the shrinking chastity of a girl swept too swiftly into marriage. He would teach her to love him, study her moods; above all, control himself. Surely, in turn, she would be grateful?

It seemed to him that he was succeeding when his castle of dreams was demolished by the tragic news of her brother's death; the result of an accident in a regimental steeplechase, with the Army of Occupation. Fiammetta's grief was terrible. He would never forget that homeward journey; her frozen face, night and day, and one wild scene of anger when she had turned on Torquil and shown her secret contempt for him and his futile consolations. It seemed to him that some hidden link between the devoted brother and sister had been a factor in her marriage and that now Fiammetta regretted it. There were depths in her he could not fathom. She was more than ever a mystery, unattainable, yet his by law. He suffered, nursing his vanity.

Grief did not bring them together; another vanished illusion. But as the weeks passed on and she drooped in the August heat, burdened with all the legal business connected with Lord Talgarth's death, she was forced to make use of Torquil, and this broke the strain between them. The town mansion went with the title to a distant cousin, and this involved the search for a fresh abode. It was Torquil who, through an agent, learnt that his dream house was for sale. His sense of romance stirred from its slumber, and he accepted the sign as an augury of happier days. But no sooner were they settled in than a fresh disaster struck at his hopes. For Fiammetta was taken ill. There were hours of suspense, of doctor's visits and the presence of silent nurses. A shadow of mystery and pain hung over the little white house. He had never felt so unwanted, so hopelessly inadequate. He drifted about, scared and helpless, forbidden his wife's room, too full of nervous tension to work.

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To his anxious questioning, the family doctor, pompous and vague, would murmur—as if he addressed a child bereft of all reasoning power—a series of formulas.

"A thorough breakdown. Overstrain. The shock of Lord Talgarth's death—and another little complication. Perfect rest is required." His eyes would narrow, studying the perplexed face of the young husband. "In a day or two, you'll be able to see her. But, even then, no conversation."

Torquil, baffled, would go back to that room on the second floor fitted up as his study, with his dressing-room leading out of it, where he slept, an unwilling exile. Fiammetta had arranged it with beautiful pieces of furniture that had once belonged to Lord Talgarth. The thought exasperated Torquil but he dared not go against her wishes or betray his secret hate of the dead. The climax had been reached with the gift of a William and Mary bureau that had graced her brother's rooms at Cambridge.

"You'll be able to work here," she had said with unconscious irony, her hands caressing the fine old wood, the tears not far from her beautiful eyes. "Jinks worked."

He could find no reply. But he kept the bureau locked, and wrote at his table, pushed up to the window.

The floor beneath was Fiammetta's. Her bedroom was at the back of the house, separated from the drawing-room by a pair of sliding doors. In it was the great gold bed, to which she had clung (after buying another), the white rugs and violet hangings (she was tired of peacock-blue), crystal ware, and, instead of the sea-piece, a cloudy, heather-covered moor. He had found her gazing across at this when he tiptoed in, the nurse on guard, for a first peep at the invalid.

He was shocked by the change in her. Even her hair had lost its lustre. The great plaits hung heavily on either side of her white face, sunk wearily in the pillows. She looked at him with a nervous dread in the depths of her shadowed eyes.

"Better?" He spoke huskily. She made a faint movement of assent. "I've not been allowed in before." He

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stooped and kissed the hand that lay like a pale flower on the violet quilt. "But I've been worrying, frightfully."

"You mustn't." Even her voice was brittle, without its old resonance.

"Then you'll try and get well?"

She smiled faintly.

"Yes." With an effort she raised her head. "I'm sorry." Her lips trembled.

"Why? You can't help it." He kissed her cheek, constrained in the presence of the nurse. "I wish I could have spared you this."

"You?" There was mystery in the look she gave him; faint amusement, relief. Then her face clouded over. "I'm tired. Thank you for all your flowers."

The nurse signed to him to go. But he went out in a happier mood. It would all come right. He had only to wait.

That was two years ago. Now he stood by his writing-table, with a cynical smile, recalling the scene. With the recovery of her health, as Time worked its accustomed spell and softened the poignancy of her loss, her old love of life returned. She emerged, like a golden butterfly that stirs its new wings in the sunshine. Marriage had been an incident; though Torquil remained as a solid proof of that hurried ceremony, with Nan and Jake for witnesses, in the background Miss Bellace, weeping—but wearing a knot of white heather! Torquil "didn't count"—to use her set's vernacular—except as a host in emergencies, or to play his part at a formal function. Every one understood that an author was much tied by his work. Fiammetta laid stress on this. She had no lack of cavaliers.

She was kind to him in her own fashion. After a period of neglect, she would bring him home some costly present: sleeve-links designed by an artist, or a rare book from a sale at Christie's. She was more popular than ever. The house was full from morning to night. Drifts of laughter and of music would steal up to Torquil's floor where he sat trying to concentrate his wandering thoughts on his writing. It was

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like working in a fair to the clamour of the merry-go-rounds and the noisy mirth of the crowd. Even his early hours were broken. Fiammetta would have her bath, breakfast in bed and write her letters, the folding doors opened wide to catch a vista of the Park through the windows of the drawing-room, and be at home to her girl friends. They would drift in from their ride or walk, for advice or gossip, and form a group about the great gold bed, assisting at the *petit lever*. With all his soul Torquil resented this invasion of her privacy. If any one had the right to be there whilst she brushed and coiled her wonderful hair, it was Fiammetta's husband; not these merry, adoring girls, quarrelling who should fasten her skirt, or loop up her long silk stockings. She was married; she belonged to him. Their presence shut him off from her. Yet his hands were tied. The house was hers. He had promised to respect her freedom. There were times when he almost hated her, followed by hours of loneliness and acute physical depression.

He was worried, too, over his business. Arkwright had changed his attitude of flattering familiarity to that of watchful criticism. A slight falling off in sales had been due—so the publisher pointed out—to the last book's "sad ending." Torquil's aggressive retort that the climax was true to life, the "inevitable conclusion," produced no effect on Arkwright. Sad endings didn't *pay*. They might be artistic, but nowadays a publisher couldn't take risks. Torquil must remember his public. Tragedy had been overdone during the years of the war. He hinted that through the author's marriage and the circle of his wife's friends he could find fresh copy and write—well, not exactly a *chronique scandaleuse*, but a clever, *risqué* society novel. There was money in it, if well done. Society folk would recognize the principal characters, or declare that they did—same thing! That would make the book sell. It was a safe draw, too, with the lower middle-classes, who were beginning to *buy* novels. Nothing they enjoyed more than a dig at the aristocracy; its luxury and its vices. Torquil would have to be careful to steer clear of any libel. Though,

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even then, it might be worth it, for the sake of gratuitous press advertisement. "Anyhow, think it over," he concluded cheerfully.

"I'll be damned if I do!" Torquil exploded. His head went back, his chin thrust forward. "If you're not satisfied with my work, I can take it elsewhere."

"M'yes." Arkwright looked vicious. "I doubt if you'd get such good terms—not after the last book. It wasn't very well reviewed. I'm speaking for your own good and I don't think you've much cause for complaint in the way I've handled your work—since you fell out with Merriman. But as you don't care for advice, I shan't say anything more. Still it's struck me that in your present position, living in Park Lane, in the public eye, so to speak, it must be difficult to preach—well, democracy, communal rights and so forth. That's why I suggested a change." He smiled, for Torquil had winced. Deliberately Arkwright had placed his finger on the raw spot. "Mind, I don't blame you. Opinions alter, and you deserve to get on in the world. You'll make a big name for yourself if you go steady with your public. And in the end you'll be its master—write anything you damn well please!" He laughed and became friendly again. "By the way, I'd like your opinion on a manuscript that's just come in. If you care to read it, I'll send it along? With a cheque."

Torquil accepted the olive branch unwillingly and went home thoughtful. The truth of the criticism rankled. He could not pose as a reformer and live as a Sybarite. He had realized this for the past year, and the book on which he was now engaged showed symptoms of a fresh departure —though not along Arkwright's lines. Still, it breathed of the new world round the author.

But he did not feel at home in it. He was still an outsider and, although his perception was acute and there was "copy to burn" about him, he could not enter into the moods and inherited instincts of the class from which he drew his characters. They did not ring true, for all his

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labour, as the hero did in *The Self-made Man,* and in *The Shepherd on the Heights.*

Only in moments of depression, haunted by this bitter doubt, would his self-assurance fail him. These were times when he laid down his pen and wished himself back in the bare room of his Chelsea lodging-house; with the littered table that needed a wad of paper beneath one uncertain leg, and the distant, monotonous drone of the steam crane, that friend of man. There, life seemed all before him, streaming out towards success. Whilst here, in the house of his dreams, he was a prisoner, chained to his folly; he lived in a trance, with no past and no future. The temptation would seize him to steal out into the dark and disappear, regain his poverty and freedom; but his passion for his wife held him. He could not live without her now. Without the touch of her satin skin, the scent of her hair, the mystery of her green-blue mocking eyes.

In her rare moments of weariness she would turn to him like a child to be petted and consoled, unconsciously absorbing his strength. Then for a few reckless hours he would be his old arrogant self and boast of his successful work, his assured position as an author. She would listen, smiling, inscrutable.

Oddly enough, Arkwright amused her. She was always absorbed by a new type that appealed to her sense of humour. His genial vulgarity, assumption of literary distinction—"All the best authors come to me," was the way he summed it up—and open reverence for a title brought her well-concealed mirth.

"When he goes to the nether regions—as he certainly will," she told Torquil, "he'll edit *Hell's Landed Gentry.* That will bring him in touch with the right people. If you ever have any trouble with him, let me know. I'll arrange a little dinner-party."

But Torquil shrank from the suggestion. It wounded his author's pride. It was *his* work, not Fiammetta's. He did not wish his path smoothed by the fact of having

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married above him. Arkwright had already made the most of the romantic adventure through paragraphs in social columns—the titles of Torquil's books appended. The proximity of *A Self-made Man* to "the Honourable Fiammetta" had more than once made Torquil writhe. He had married for love, but the world might take a different view considering his wife's birth and ample fortune. Besides, she had nothing to do with his novels. They could stand on their own merit. But even the death of Lord Talgarth had been used by the shrewd publisher in connection with the young author—"whose last book was now in its N——th edition."

To be helped in any way by Lyddon? The manifest irony of the gods. Instead of the subtle revenge he had planned over the enemy of his youth, Torquil found himself involved in a grotesque parade of mourning, aware that a single lapse of respect would for ever alienate his wife. Talgarth had died without the knowledge that the man who had suddenly married his sister was an old college associate. The surname was a common one and Fiammetta had called him "Torquil" in her letters to her brother, explaining that he was a rising author whom she had met at the Considines. It was near enough to the truth to soothe Jinks's apprehensions. There was nothing to stir from its slumber memories in the young soldier of a friendship ending in disillusion.

Although, in his saner hours, he realized his escape from unpleasant complications, Torquil regretted his lost chance of humiliating the man who had scorned him. Lyddon's eyes would search his own out of the big framed photograph on the mantelpiece facing the gilded bed as he lay by Fiammetta's side. Torquil would turn off the light quickly to escape from that silent scrutiny and the features so like his wife's, virile, yet nobler in expression. That clean-cut, smiling mouth, disdaining the lies of an impostor. God, how he hated the man! Both living and dead, he had come between Torquil and his desire. For he could not rid himself of the impression that Jinks had played an

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unconscious part in his own amazing marriage and that, with his death, Fiammetta had nursed a grudge against her husband. Yet she was his for those few hours between the darkness and the dawn. It roused in him a cruelty that is ever the haunting shadow of passion. Not that she seemed to resent his moods. She accepted him as her husband; calmly, incuriously. She had never once questioned him on his origin or place of birth, viewing with indifference his apparent lack of relations. He had served some mysterious caprice or purpose, and with the fresh day she would dismiss him and take up her self-centred life; that of a queen, with a court of admirers obedient to her whim and pleasure. That was the real Fiammetta. The leader in every social fashion, drinking success from a golden cup.

Somewhere in the house below a door opened, and the sound of voices and laughter penetrated to Torquil's ears, as he stood frowning by the window. It roused him from his brooding thoughts. He shrugged his shoulders wearily, sat down at his table and proceeded to fill his fountain pen. His hand shook and the ink spirted on to the open manuscript he had been reading for Arkwright. He wiped it off negligently—another man's work! Poor stuff, too. Written by an amateur with a title—hence Arkwright's interest. He felt a malicious touch of pleasure in meditating on his report. His cynical mood would find relief in a few damnatory phrases; terse, subtle and humorous. But as he tapped his replenished pen on his thumb nail he heard a knock at the door behind him, and turned, startled.

"Come in!" Who could it be at this hour?

A laughing voice answered the question:

"It's me—Nan! D'you mind the dog?"

"No. What dog?" He was on his feet as the door opened and in swung Miss Considine at the end of a leash, preceded by an Irish terrier.

"I had to come up." She was breathless. "Fiammetta said you were working, but I risked it. I wanted to tell you my news."

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CHAPTER XX

"IT doesn't bite!" Nan sat down in the chair Torquil offered her and set the straining animal free. "Just you live up to that, Tatters! Only sniffing," she explained as the terrier growled about Torquil's legs. "Says a lot, but means nothing. In the usual 'society way.' Ah, I got that in first, this time!" She laughed, her white teeth lending to her brown face the clean look of youth allied to health and high spirits. "There!" Tatters had settled down, satisfied with his surroundings. "Isn't he a perfect lamb? I'm taking care of him. For Jake."

Torquil nodded.

"So that's the news?" The drop in her voice had enlightened him; her shyness in uttering the name. It seemed strange to find it in Nan and he felt a curious touch of envy. So, in the old days, had he murmured 'Fiammetta.' He forced a smile. "Since when?"

"Yesterday. Tatters did it. A dog-fight." She laughed again, aware of her absurdity. "A homeric battle! We got them apart, at last, but Jake thought I was bitten. And —well, he was *rather* an old dear and so we patched it up between us."

"And you're happy?" Torquil's face was wistful.

She nodded, colouring under his scrutiny.

"I thought I'd run up and tell you, because, in a way, I owe it to you. Of course, Jake——" She hesitated.

"Was fond of my wife," said Torquil dryly, "and I removed the temptation."

"Oh, it was only on his side," Nan naïvely explained. "All the same, it's a rotten thing for a man to be keen on a girl who doesn't care twopence for him." Torquil winced, unperceived by the speaker. "I shan't forget the day you

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were married. I had an awful time with Jake after we'd seen you off in the train." She looked blankly past Torquil. "He asked me to marry him."

"Well, wasn't that——" He checked himself. "But perhaps you weren't fond of him then?"

"Wasn't I!" Nan's head went back. She straightened her slim shoulders in the neat tailor-made, well-brushed but showing signs of wear. "That's all you know! I've always—liked him. But I wasn't going to catch a man on the rebound like that. It's not the way to happiness. Besides, I'm proud. I didn't see myself exactly as a—substitute! Now it's really *me* he wants." Her honesty flared out in the ungrammatical conclusion. In some hidden fashion, it shamed Torquil.

"But you might have lost him," he suggested, following up his train of conjecture, and comparing it to his own case.

"I couldn't help that." She crossed her feet and looked down at her brogued shoes. "Don't you understand, Torquil? I thought, somehow, that you would."

"I do. You were right." His voice was bitter. "You wanted respect as well as love—or what men call love. I sometimes wonder——" He broke off. In the silence that followed, they could hear music in the room below; the firm touch, that is rarely deceptive, of masculine fingers on the key-board. "Who's down there?" he asked abruptly.

"Pierrot. With Mrs. Ferriby. And Audrey Letts—poor old Audrey! Fancy living with the Puffin?" Nan gave a little shiver.

"Lusignan?" Torquil frowned. "I thought he was safe at Warsaw—at the Legation there?" The "safe" slipped out, unperceived by him.

"So he was, but he's home again. Wangled it somehow. Fed up with the fair Poles!" She laughed, then suddenly sobered down. Love had sharpened her perceptions. "I shouldn't worry about Pierrot. He's an old habit, that's all! But—Torquil?" She leaned forward. "We've been good pals, you and I. May I speak honestly?"

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"Do. I'd enjoy some naked truths!"

"Oh, well, if it comes to that you've only to go to the Opera and cast your eyes round the boxes." Nan twinkled shamelessly. "Still, it might teach you to be a Cave man and you'd learn to manage Fiammetta." He frowned but she went on doggedly, "If you don't, it will lead to disaster. I'm fond of her—you know that? But I'm not blind to her faults. She thinks she can do anything—just because she's Fiammetta! If only you'd put your foot down."

"In what way?" His voice was weary.

"Well, there's this Ferriby woman, for instance. She's always after Fiammetta, and she's got a frightfully bad name. She's a friend of that Lady Halsby, and Carden Voyse—you know whom I mean? It's not good enough, Torquil. If I were you, I'd forbid her the house. It's *your* house."

"No, it isn't." The confession was wrung from him. "I'm only the male caretaker"—he sneered—"keeping an eye on the plate! Even the furniture's Fiammetta's. What can I do? I'm powerless. I'm beginning to make money, but not enough to buy my freedom."

Nan sprang up impulsively.

"Don't! You're *not* to talk like that." She laid a hand on his shoulder and gave it a little shake. "I won't let you. It's hateful, Torquil. You seem to forget that she chose you, out of a score of other men, for *yourself*."

"Did she?" asked Torquil. "Then you know more than I do, Nan."

"I do. You're a perfect baby still. I can't think where you've spent your life, to learn so little—and yet so much! All your wisdom goes into your books. I suppose that's the truth?" She frowned, impatient. "You place dreams before action. And Fiammetta's much too clever, too strong a character, to have any sympathy with weakness. That's where Pierrot understands her; he never lets her master him. It's the secret of their friendship." She leaned down and patted the dog who had stirred, aware of her raised voice. "*You* understand, don't you, Tatters? You wouldn't

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be so fond of Jake if he let you run blindly into danger."

"You think I do that?" Torquil scowled.

"Do you try and prevent it?" Nan retorted. "I know Fiammetta's difficult. Still, you're married to her." She paused and darted a glance at his troubled face. "She ought to come before your writing."

"She does. That's why my work suffers." The pain rang out in the words.

Echo seemed to answer it. For, from below, rose a baritone voice with a throb of passionate feeling in it: Pierrot singing to Fiammetta. It ceased and was followed by a series of chords that swept down the piano with the effect of a triumph both of skill and of supple strength.

"I can't think how you can write here," Nan exclaimed impulsively. "I'd go down and turn them out!"

"Would you?" Torquil shook his head. "To be an object of ridicule? Who cares about my writing?"

"To be a *man*," said Nan stoutly, "and hold your own against a crowd of people who prey on Fiammetta. She's paying Mrs. Ferriby's bills. I shan't tell you how I know it, but I do. I know Myra, too. We went to the same convent, until"—she paused—"she was turned out."

"Expelled?" Torquil was roused in earnest.

"'Removed by her parents,' it was called." Nan had turned away from him and was gazing out of the low window. "Jolly the Park looks from here. I'd love a house like this, but Jinks is keen on the country. We've got to make a home for Tatters, and country air's best for the child!" She wheeled round. "So long, Torquil. Cheeri-oh! It's a kind old world, taking it all in all, and full of decent men and women—though one sometimes runs across a rotter. Like myself! A candid friend. Have I put my foot in it?"

"Never." He studied her curiously. He had rarely thought her pretty before, but to-day there was a mysterious glow, more spiritual than physical, on her clear-skinned, mischievous face. She had come into her woman's kingdom. "Tell Jake he's a lucky man."

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"Rather! I'll rub it in."

She fastened the fur round her neck and pulled down her tweed coat; then dived into a deep pocket, and out came her powder-puff. Torquil watched her smother her nose.

"That all right?" she asked her host.

"A little too much," he suggested gravely.

"Oh, well, it will soon blow off. I'm taking Tatters across the Park, for the sake of his figure." She held out her hand. "I shall see you at Audrey's dance?"

"I'm not sure. Fiammetta's going."

"Exactly. You *ought* to be sure."

She had reached the door. He opened it and their eyes met in a brief exchange of question and answer. Torquil gave way.

"All right. I'll come. Just to see you with old Jake, docile, on a string."

"He isn't!" she flashed back. Then her mood changed. "Good boy! I liked that last book of yours, though the end of it was rather a sell. Why couldn't you let them be happy, poor dears, after all they'd gone through?"

"It wouldn't have been true to life." Torquil looked obstinate.

"No? All the same, one felt cheated. I still love your *Self-made Man* best. You remember—the book you signed for me?"

"Do you? Why?" His eyes narrowed. He was thinking of Arkwright's criticisms.

"I can't say." She was puzzled.

"The happy ending?" Torquil suggested.

"Not only that. It was the story. Just the way things *do* happen."

"Real?"

She nodded, her foot on the stairs.

"And the man deserved to succeed. No, don't come down I can let myself out and I hate being made a visitor. Go back to your work." She was off, a shortened grip on the

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leash, as the dog leaped from stair to stair. "Steady, Tatters! You'll break your neck."

Torquil went back into his room. He sat down at his table but his thoughts wandered from his report.

Nan, his Tarascon friend, engaged. The girl he had despised as shallow; not content with a spurious conquest, patient, insisting on genuine love. Would he ever understand women? He had known so few intimately. Suddenly, out of the mists of the past, Josephine's face rose before him, tender, compassionate, the stars shining in her eyes. Real. That was it. Real as the hero of that early effort, *A Self-made Man*. Had he, like the dog in the fable, spurned the substance to grasp the shadow? He wondered what had become of the woman who had once held his heart; then, with an author's egoism, of her verdict on the finished romance written round the sapphire sea and the heights where the mad shepherd piped.

There was something alluring and pathetic in the memory of those days; of a love that asked for no return and spurned the thought of possession. An artist's dream. He went to his shelf to take down the book that held the Josephine of his ideals, of his chivalrous instincts and youthful despair. It was gone; a gap in the precious row.

Then he remembered. Fiammetta had borrowed the copy to lend to her friend, Mrs. Ferriby, who had lost it. A first edition; long since out of print, and precious to his author's soul, like the first shoes of a baby which a mother places among her treasures. He thought of her careless apology. Damn the woman! It was a theft. A woman like that, too—he scowled. He would have it out with Fiammetta. Nan was right. He should be the master. He would rule his wife and earn her respect.

He lunched alone. Fiammetta was out—in the car, so the servant informed him. But at four o'clock she came in, radiant and full of life, in a new moleskin coat, an absurd cap of monkey fur wedged down on her shining hair. In Torquil's present mood her beauty seemed a subtle insult.

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To his nervous fancy it carried with it the suggestion of some fresh conquest that she flaunted in his face. About her was the mysterious glow he had sensed in Nan, the subtle and exquisite fulfilment of her womanhood. He looked at her curiously.

"Hullo!" She was surprised to find him at this hour in the drawing-room. "What a big fire! It's hot in here." She unfastened her furs. "Had a good morning's work, Torquil?"

He ignored the polite inquiry.

"I didn't know you were out to lunch. Where have you been?"

Her eyes widened. A certain aloofness came over her. She slipped her arms out of the flame-coloured lining and threw the coat across a chair.

"You might open one of those windows?"

He moved unwillingly to obey her.

"Thanks. I've people coming to tea, and it's really not cold to-day." She glanced at his sombre face and moved on towards her bedroom. "I must change." It was evident there would be no answer to his question.

Torquil intercepted her passage.

"I want to talk to you."

"Now?" She frowned. "Then you'll have to do it whilst I'm dressing. I've only just time as it is. Can't it wait until this evening?"

"I thought you were dining out with the Lettses and going to a theatre?"

"So I am." She shrugged her shoulders. "Very well."

He followed her into the room beyond, and sat down sideways on a chair that faced her littered writing-table. On the blotter was a musical score, unfinished, her composition. Latterly she had wearied of dancing and gone back to her earlier love. Torquil glanced at it furtively. He found it difficult to begin his carefully planned conversation.

Fiammetta was slipping out of her dress with the amazing celerity she employed over major details of her toilet, though

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she would stand for minutes together deciding on the choice of a ring. She seemed to have forgotten his presence. Absorbed, she leaned towards the glass and examined a tiny flaw on the creamy curve of her chin. She powdered the place lightly, opened a narrow, antique box of ivory inlaid with gold that held a mirror in the lid, and selected a small black patch. Moistening it, she dabbed it down over the condemned spot. Then, with a swift movement she turned to the washing-stand, filled the crystal basin, lathered and rinsed her hands, and dipped them into a wooden bowl holding a home-made paste of almonds. With the same absorbed attention, she rubbed in the fragrant compound, dried the slender, pink-tipped fingers, and started briskly to polish her nails.

Torquil hardened his heart. Not for her husband's admiration did she perform these sacred rites.

"Fiammetta?"

She gave a start.

"Oh, I'd forgotten! What is it, Torquil?"

"I want you to listen to me," he began.

"One minute!" She opened the wardrobe, chose a frock of biscuit-coloured taffeta, shook it out, and stepped into it, drawing it up round her supple hips. "Now?" She smiled in his direction, her fingers busy with the hooks.

Torquil remembered his opening phrase.

"I'm going to ask you to look back carefully over the last two years, recalling the promise I made you when we became engaged." He stopped dead; Fiammetta was laughing.

"My dear boy, why this harangue? It sounds like the letters that are read in a case of restitution of conjugal rights. You're not thinking of leaving me, are you?"

He gave an impatient movement and his elbow caught the page of music, which shot out on to the parquet. As he picked it up he saw that it was a song, the music by his wife, the words by—*Carden Voyse!* He thrust out the manuscript to her.

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"You know this man?" His voice shook.

"Certainly." She was perfectly calm.

"Well, it's the limit!" said Torquil.

Fiammetta drew from its case a long string of pink coral, held it against the folds of her dress, then fastened the clasp behind her neck.

"I don't follow the connexion. What has Carden Voyse to do with the inventory you wish me to take—carefully—of the last two years?"

"Just this"—he would not be turned from his purpose by her light mockery—"that I've kept my word and you haven't. I've given you the freedom you claimed, but I never agreed to stand by and see you drag my name in the dust. You're my wife and I've certain rights."

"And you take them, don't you?" Over her shoulder she flung him a curious glance. "I don't think you've much cause for complaint. You're surely not jealous of this poet?"

"I'm jealous of your reputation." He clung to his point desperately.

Her expression changed. She seemed to be thinking. Even her actions were arrested. With a sapphire ring halfway to her finger, her beautiful neck in a downward curve as her eyes studied the dark stone, she waited for his next words. In her utter immobility there was a secret suggestion of fear; but Torquil, possessed by anger, was blinded to fine shades. He controlled his voice with an effort.

"You *must* know what people say about Mrs. Ferriby and her set?"

"Myra?" She looked up quickly. "So that's the trouble!" Her face had cleared. She smiled with a genuine touch of amusement. Torquil watched her, amazed and indignant. "I'm not particularly keen on her. She's clever, but"—she shrugged her shoulders—"she's one of those women who looks on friendship as a monopoly. And that doesn't suit me. Still, I'm sorry for her. She has a struggle to face the present hard conditions. As to Carden Voyse, I know what you mean, but I'm not concerned with his

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decadent fancies—only his verse. It's the hardest thing in the world to find words that lend themselves to decent music. His saving grace—poor little worm! It should count to him for righteousness." She slipped her feet as she spoke into a pair of bronze slippers with little straps above the instep. She held out the button-hook to Torquil. "Fasten these—there's a good man! I can't stoop in this skirt."

He hesitated, taken aback, not only by her speech but her action. She drew nearer. The faint scent of her hair, that always brought to him unforgettable memories, reached his resistant senses.

"You want me to drop Mrs. Ferriby?" She looked gravely into his eyes. "I see your point. Perhaps you're right. Anyhow, I'll play fair."

"You're serious?" He caught at her hand and through some mischievous trick of hers found himself—holding the button-hook!

"I am—if you'll hurry up!" A sound of steps on the stairs outside and the closing of the drawing-room door had warned her of the guests' arrival.

"Fiammetta?" His heart was in his voice.

A sudden pity flashed up in her eyes.

"Yes, I'll play fair." She stooped and kissed him.

He knelt down and buttoned her shoes.

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CHAPTER XXI

THEY went to Monte Carlo early in the New Year; a party of six that included the Puffin and Audrey; Audrey's young sister—known as the "Compleat Minx"—and "another man," an uncertain factor up to the last moment when Pierrot nobly filled the breach.

It was a very different journey to the one Torquil had taken before in a crowded second-class carriage on his way to Les Lecques. The Puffin oozed money; moreover, liked his money's worth. One of his favourite maxims was: "I don't ask for luxury but I do like simple comfort." Torquil, for ever after, connected the phrase with champagne.

He would never forget his first sight of the jewelled town on the blue waters where Nature throws her fairest cloak over man's pleasure strained to excess; his vice, despair, and vain triumphs. Alone, he would have revelled in the exquisite natural surroundings, ignoring the lure of the casino; for gambling had no charm for him and it hurt him to lose money. But his new vow, to protect Fiammetta, chained him to the feverish rounds of Riviera gaities; the ponderous friendship of the Puffin, strutting proudly between two women who drew admiration from every quarter, and the mischief of the Compleat Minx, setting her cap at Lusignan.

In Letts he saw the antithesis of his own case. The man who paid, was blandly content with the possession of a well-bred, beautiful wife, courteous but indifferent to him, and whose outlook was bounded by the material spoils of his existence.

Fiammetta and Audrey gambled continuously, but the

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Puffin only at intervals, late at night and for high stakes. He had a passion for motoring and the day they arrived he chartered a large and luxurious touring car.

"It's air I want," he told Torquil, "not those stuffy Rooms from morning to night. All right for the ladies, who can show off their Paris gowns. Me for the open road."

In this they found a point in common, but the author modified his opinion after the first few drives. For Letts insisted on driving himself and his main preoccupation was speed. Short-sighted to the verge of blindness, and hazy about the rule of the road, he would scorch along the Corniche with a reckless disregard for danger, indifferent to the scenery. Torquil, sitting by his side, would hear him murmur cheerfully, "If you go to the right, you're wrong—no, that's *England*," when round the next dazzling bend an approaching car flashed in the sunshine, and see to the left a precipitous cliff, to the right the edge of the road, unguarded, with a sheer drop to the rocks and the sea. There would follow moments of tense suspense and the danger would begin again.

Torquil dreaded these expeditions, which spoilt his enjoyment of the country, blurred by the pace at which they drove, leaving a cloud of white dust behind them. How different had been those peaceful excursions with Josephine three years ago. Now the days passed in a whirl of excitement, lunches at the various villas, concerts, dances, dinners, gambling, Fiammetta fêted wherever she went, Torquil politely "included." It seemed to him that at Monte Carlo no one had ever heard of his books, though the Puffin's claim to distinction as the "Guano King" was met with respect. Even the Compleat Minx laid siege to her brother-in-law's affections—to be financed at the tables!

One crystalline, sunny morning Torquil took a holiday, his polite excuse a headache and the need for a breathing space in which to think of the new book, half-written and hopelessly shelved. The remainder of the party were motoring over to San Remo. He wandered up to La Turbie, where he lunched at a little inn and fraternized with an

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English artist, who had dropped in for a cup of coffee. After the gay crowd below and the feverish inconsequence of Fiammetta's social friends, he found this shabby, casual acquaintance, with his rambling talk and silences, a refreshing companion. He learned that the artist had a room in La Turbie where he could live cheaply, until, his series of sketches complete, he would descend upon Monte Carlo for a week at one of the big hotels and exhibit his work in the lounge for sale. The proprietor, reducing his terms, would take a commission on the proceeds which enabled the artist to wander on to another beauty spot, living from day to day, happy and improvident, with spells of work and of idleness.

"No good forcing it," he told Torquil. "I only paint when I'm in the mood."

"You're lucky," the author responded, with a touch of bitterness. "You haven't a publisher behind you and a public that must be satisfied."

There followed a long argument on the sanctity of work: a mistress to woo, not a stubborn master, according to Torquil's new friend. Working to time was slavery; to amass money a greater crime. Of course, if a man was married—— He shrugged his shoulders and smiled at Torquil. Why marry? There was plenty of love freely given in the South; a cleaner form of adventure, according to his philosophy, provided that a man met it with a sane and healthy joy of youth and a reverence for simple beauty. Money must not enter in, nor the chance of satiety. Love must be there as well as desire. There should be no search for illicit adventure. It grew, out of the heart of Nature.

"But—many loves?" objected Torquil.

"Why not?" The artist spoke serenely. The question was difficult to answer, to a man so removed from convention, without an excursion into ethics, and Torquil remained silent. "Have you only loved once?" He smiled as the younger man's face betrayed him.

It was strange how he had been haunted lately by memories of Josephine. She seemed to belong to the vivid

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sea, to the breeze that rustled through the palms, an elusive spirit that promised a peace denied him by Fiammetta. Suddenly he found himself abandoning all reserve, pouring out his private troubles, as a man will to a stranger whilst concealing it from his best friend. The artist listened, sucking away at a pipe that had seen good service.

"I should cut adrift if I were you," was his comment at the close. "It's no good. You're not happy. You can't even do your work." He thought for a moment and went on, stretching his legs in the golden sunshine. "The gods send a man into the world naked. That's their infinite wisdom. He proceeds to hamper himself by acquiring possessions; heaps them up, until at last his shoulder groans beneath the burden. If he's sane, he returns to his earlier state, or as near it as possible—a free man, close to Nature, despising wealth and ambition, seeing love as the only reward; love of all creatures, and love of work. For *itself*—that's where you've blundered." His eyes grew vague, lost in his dream. "To follow the light, to catch for a moment the wonder and joy of creation, to be one with the universe. Success, the world's success, is nothing. It's complicated by sordid details. But the freedom of the spirit that comes from a knowledge of achievement—— It's rare—but, by God, it's worth it! Cut loose. Start life again."

"I can't." Torquil's voice was muffled.

"Because of the woman?"

Torquil nodded.

"Oh, damn marriage!" cried the painter. "It's immoral in a case like yours." His eyes narrowed. "Then, cut work."

Torquil turned on him furiously.

"Thanks! I'd sooner cut my throat."

His new friend chuckled.

"That's answered me! You've still a spark of grace in you. Some day you'll win free." He tapped the ashes out of his pipe against the leg of the marble-topped table, and went on thoughtfully, "I don't like compromise, still—— Why not take a room, right away from your wife's house, a

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corner you can call your own and where you can work undisturbed? It will give your imagination a chance. At present, it's harnessed to your senses."

Torquil's eyes widened, considering the suggestion. He could see himself again in the bare room that breathed of work, above the quiet Chelsea square.

"It's a good idea. I wonder I never thought of that. I will. Let's have a drink on it." He called the waiter, hovering on the border of the little terrace, and ordered two cognacs.

They drank in a friendly silence, staring out over the wonderful view. Far away to the west rose the violet ridge of the Esterels, and the great pageant of sea and shore swept past them into Italy, blue and white, and gold and silver, interwoven with the fairy-like green of the olives, the groves of lemon and orange, and the darker note of ilex and cork-trees. The air was so still they could hear the faint groan of the cog-wheels as the train toiled up the *funiculaire*, with a dulled, intermittent sound of firing below from the *Tir aux Pigeons*, echoing back from the terraced houses. The artist was measuring the shadows thrown from the stucco balustrade.

"Time I was off." He rose to his feet.

Torquil stirred from his half-slumber.

"Work to do?"

"A sketch I began yesterday at Roquebrune. If I start now I shall catch the same light—that sudden quickening before the sunset. Good luck to you." He held out a hand, supple and strong, the base of the palm smeared by a patch of paint, that was repeated on the frayed edge of his cuff.

Torquil, regretfully, watched him go; the stocky figure, sublimely indifferent to all but ease in his clothes, not handsome but virile and attractive, with his quick smile and thoughtful eyes, a man contented with his life. But lacking in principles, he decided. A dreamer, who hid his idleness under a cloak of philosophy and treated his fitful amours as a part of his love of Nature. He would never achieve

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greatness—didn't seem to care about it! Still, his advice had been interesting, and the last suggestion of practical use. Torquil would certainly act upon it and find a *pied-à-terre* for work. This prolonged visit to Monte Carlo had been a bad break in his writing; just as he was getting a grip on the latter half of his new novel, beginning to feel the end in sight. Impossible to work here. Still, he might introduce some further chapters out of England? A vivid impression of Monte Carlo. Or would it delay the story? No, it fitted into the life of the principal characters. Only the background need be changed.

On his journey home he began to plan it, leaning back on the hard seat of the empty compartment as the train slid down the steep incline of that Rigi of the Riviera. It halted with a grinding of brakes on the platform for the *Hermitage*, and a stout but handsome lady in black got in, sat down facing Torquil, started, smiled and held out her hand.

"How do you do?" It was Mrs. Rollit. "I passed you in the Casino last night, but you didn't remember me."

He was taken aback. Her presence there seemed to bring Josephine still nearer, awakening further memories. With an effort he recovered his presence of mind.

"Then I'm sure I didn't see you," he responded gallantly.

She looked at him with her old smile, at once indulgent and slightly coquettish; the smile of a woman who has been an effortless success in her youth and still carried about with her the shadow of past adulation.

"I don't wonder! You were with what my nephew calls 'a perfect dream.' Dressed in white, with auburn hair." She was frankly curious.

"Oh, my wife," responded Torquil.

Her eyes widened.

"Really? I must congratulate you. I was wondering who she was. I saw her again to-day, coming out from lunch at Ciro's."

It was Torquil's turn to look surprised.

"I think you must have been mistaken. They've gone to San Remo in the car. I played truant." He smiled at

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Kate. "I wanted to be alone and think, instead of motoring through the dust. Perhaps you saw my wife's double? Your occult propensities!"

"Oh, no. She was there in the flesh." Mrs. Rollit grew obstinate. "She had on the same hat. She was talking French to the man who was with her, a really well turned-out Frenchman. Dressed in England—you know what I mean? No details wrong." She caught herself up, "Am I being indiscreet? Perhaps she was playing truant, too!" and changed the subject, aware, too late, that her tongue had been at its old tricks. "I read *The Shepherd on the Heights* and enjoyed it thoroughly. Delightful! It brought it all back to me; those sunny days at Les Lecques. Sad, Mr. Merriman's death, wasn't it? He was so devoted. Poor Josephine! It's lonely for her, widowed and childless, in that big house. She has asked me to Westwick this summer and I'm hoping to fit it in. Have you seen her lately?"

"No." His eyes were averted. "I seem to have quite lost sight of her since she deserted London."

"Still, Westwick's barely an hour's journey." She studied him shrewdly, interested by the confession. "Why don't you go and look her up? It would do her good to see more people. She sees no one but David Heron and now I hear he's gone away." She lowered her voice. "Between you and me, it's her own fault. I always hoped—— Such a nice fellow, too, and they have so many tastes in common." The inference was obvious. Torquil felt an absurd annoyance. His expression betrayed the fact and the widow was secretly amused. So he hadn't got over that boyish folly? Suddenly she remembered his wife, so elegant and assured, on the steps of the well-known restaurant, talking to Pierre de Lusignan. "I can't, somehow, picture you as a married man." She smiled at Torquil.

"I've been married for nearly three years," he retorted.

"Despite your theories?" She teased him: "I can see you now holding forth on matrimony as a stumbling-

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block to a man's successful career, in the garden at Les Lecques."

"I was wrong. It's—excellent copy!" The jest sounded a trifle bitter and the mischief died out of her face.

"Well, I hope you're happy," she murmured kindly.

"Very." The word was uttered quickly, with a touch of defiance.

"He's not," said Kate to herself. "Poor boy! Such a beautiful woman, too. But I never could trust red hair. I must write and tell Josephine. It's odd she never mentions him. I suppose it was one of the many friendships in which Richard was the connecting link."

As they got out at the terminus she gave Torquil her address.

"Look me up if you're my way. Though I shan't expect you," she added gaily.

"Why not?" He spoke with his old abruptness.

"A quiet hotel full of middle-aged people. Too dull for a gay young man!" Her face changed; became absent. "But Maurice likes it." The old refrain. "We were there together. Years ago."

Torquil, instead of mirth, felt a queer pang of envy. If he died to-morrow, would Fiammetta ever give him another thought?

"I'll come, if I can get away. It's not always easy," he explained. "We're here with friends, a party of six. My wife seems to collect engagements, as some people do old china! I'm generally involved. But I'm glad I played truant to-day." He gave her a provocative glance and she laughed back.

"You've not improved! You're just the same. You'd make love to any woman—at seventeen or at seventy—if you thought she would come in useful for copy. Oh, yes, I saw through that book. It was Josephine, from beginning to end!" Her smiling face grew grave. She sighed. "Josephine as she *might* be—if only she weren't so incurably loyal."

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The phrase rang in Torquil's ears long after they had parted. In Mrs. Rollit's indiscretions there was always a strong substratum of truth. Loyal? Was Fiammetta loyal? What was she doing to-day with Pierrot? Alone, or were the others with her? If he ever found her unfaithful, Torquil swore he would be revenged. She was clever, but he was clever, too. He would not be easily deceived. He caught his reflection in the glass of a shop window as he passed and his vanity reawakened. Handsome, young, a successful author. He swaggered across the well-planned square, with its palm-trees and its bright flower-beds, the groups of plants bisected by lines of dazzling marble chips, and was conscious of more than one woman's glance. His meeting with Mrs. Rollit, her instant recognition and kindly show of interest, had renewed his old confidence in himself. His head back, chin thrust forward, he strode into the gay hotel to find the rest of the party assembled round a table laden with tea and cakes. The Puffin greeted him jocosely.

"Missed the drive of your life! We skidded coming into Mentone—they'd been watering the street—and took off the corner of a tram. Or was it the conductor's button? Anyhow, you can picture the fuss. Luckily the car's all right save for a few scratches and nobody a penny the worse."

"Except for our nerves," Audrey murmured.

Torquil looked at Fiammetta, sitting next to Lusignan. "You weren't hurt?"

"Not at all." Her green-blue eyes were raised to his without hesitation, but deep down in their wonderful depths there lurked a mischievous amusement.

Torquil noted this and drove on defiantly:

"A good thing you had Pierrot at hand to act as an interpreter." From the Compleat Minx came a giggle, ill-suppressed, and Torquil's glance shot to her face. "What did he do?"

"Nothing." Lusignan spoke for himself. "I possessed my soul in patience."

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"Patience," said Fiammetta calmly, "is Pierrot's sole remaining virtue. No wonder he's proud of it." Every one laughed. "Don't you want some tea?"

"Thanks." Torquil took the chair that was empty, next to the Puffin's.

"Where did you lunch," asked that individual. "You ought to have been with us. A *langouste*——"

Torquil interrupted him.

"Guess?" He smiled, measuring his words. "I wanted to see some pretty people. For 'copy,' of course! So I went"—he paused to take his cup from his wife's hand, watching her face. *Did* a shadow pass across it?—"to a little inn at La Turbie."

In her quick, amused: "How like you!" he hunted for a note of relief.

His eyes passed furtively to the Frenchman. Lusignan seemed absorbed in a creamy cake of a perilous nature. He swallowed the last mouthful and wiped his fingers fastidiously on the little paper napkin.

"And you found them?" Fiammetta inquired.

"Who?" He had lost the thread.

"The 'pretty people.' In the interests of literature."

"No." He was suddenly confused. Was he making a fool of himself? "But I met a very decent chap, an artist, staying there. We talked."

"You mean," said the Compleat Minx, "that *you* talked and *he* listened. That's where his decency comes in!" She seemed to be bubbling over with mischief. Before he could find a retort, she laid a hand on Pierrot's arm. "How's the poor wrist? The one you hurt in the smash?" she inquired with an open tenderness.

"Better," said the victim smoothly. He moved it gently from side to side and the Minx laughed.

"Poor dear! Its musical career *napoo!*"

The Puffin butted in.

"I'm awfully sorry, old chap, but it really wasn't my fault. The road was like glass. Why didn't you tell me? I'd no idea you were damaged."

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Torquil's mistrust was evaporating. It *must* have been Mrs. Rollit's mistake. Suddenly in a mirror behind Fiammetta's head, he caught a glimpse of the Puffin's face. Sly satisfaction was painted on it.

"I forgot you were on that side," Letts continued from his chair, a little to the rear of Torquil's, and his left eyelid drooped. In the wink was expressed all his native vulgarity: a flash of the man behind his wealth and hardly-acquired veneer.

A murderous instinct invaded Torquil. It was true, then, Mrs. Rollit's story? The pair had been left behind and they were all in league against him, laughing at him in their sleeves. Even that child of seventeen, and Audrey of the Madonna face. With an effort he kept his countenance blank, whilst his thoughts angrily whirled on. Should he show them up? To acknowledge himself a duped husband? Never. He saw a better way. He would go home, back to his work, careless of his wife's intrigues, indifferent to her opinion. He mastered his anger and looked up, to catch the Minx's watchful eye.

"Well, I think I had the best of it. No risk to life, or digestion! I've enjoyed myself, out of the crowd, and I've got a new idea for a book."

"Another?" In Fiammetta's voice was the old touch of mockery. She had once called his writing a "hobby." The passing dart still rankled.

"An incurable habit," he answered lightly. "The worst of it is that I never want so desperately to work as when circumstances are against it. When I've ample chances I long to slack, but holidays have a perverse effect. This lotus-land is driving me hard. I'm off out of it to-morrow."

"What?" Fiammetta looked startled.

"Have you any objection?" His voice was polite. "I'm leaving you in good hands—though I don't quite trust Letts. Not when he's doing his Brooklands stunts. Otherwise I think you're safe." Slowly and insolently, his eyes travelled round the group and lingered, meeting Lusignan's. "Yes.

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And among old friends, who will forgive me for breaking up the happy party."

"But you *can't* go!" The Compleat Minx tossed her head. "We shall be odd numbers."

Torquil saw his longed-for chance to pay back old scores. He detested Audrey's sister and her pose as an *ingénue* which permitted endless flirtation and a crude disregard for the victim's feelings.

"I'll back you to prevent that!" He smiled at her provokingly. "So long as there's a man in Monte who can be commandeered or bought. That's the beauty of innocence. It remembers its Noah's Ark—the animals always two and two. Oh, happy childhood!" He saw the colour leap up into her pointed face and turned to his wife. "Joking apart, I had a letter from Arkwright this morning. He's getting impatient at the delay in sending in my present book. Takes time to publish now. I must settle down and finish it. I thought it all through at La Turbie. It's pleasant here but, after all, my work comes first." His eyes kindled and he laughed, glorying in a sense of freedom and aware of astonishment and annoyance in the woman who was so sure of him.

"As you like." Her eyes defied him.

There followed a chorus of disapproval but Torquil stood firm.

"It's nice to feel I shall be missed," he said obliquely to the Puffin, who was looking a shade uneasy. He had covered certain hazy records of the past successfully by his pompous "respectability." Of all things he feared scandal. Fiammetta was his wife's friend. She belonged to a circle he revered, but he wished Lusignan would depart. Had Torquil seen through the trick played upon him that afternoon? Quite harmless, as he told himself, but still—— Oh, confound these women! He hunted for the "simple comfort" of a highly-priced cigar, which he had smuggled through the customs.

"I'm going to pack," Torquil announced, "and then have a last flutter." He was conscious as he left the lounge of

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his wife's glance that followed him and a chill pervading the happy party. He damned them as he sought the lift with the cheerful contempt of a married man who, however much he may love his wife, is conscious of his lost freedom, and sees ahead a few clear days of celibacy and unhampered action, freed from petticoat government. That was the *real* holiday!

But in the night his conscience pricked him. He was leaving her to Lusignan, with no restraint save her sense of honour.

"Well," he decided, "this will prove it. Her 'incurable loyalty'! If I stayed, it would make no difference. Not in the present crowd. And I won't stay to be laughed at. She doesn't care. She has never cared." He looked down at her sleeping face in the narrow bed next to his, as the dawn filtered in at the window, a face strangely pure in sleep yet framed by those heavy plaits that might have been Cleopatra's. They only needed pearls strung through them and a jewelled disk between her brows. What lay beneath those closed lids, faintly shadowed by late hours? Was any man master of that heart beating in her white bosom? He felt reckless. The artist's words returned to him with redoubled force. This sort of marriage *was* immoral.

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CHAPTER XXII

FOR a week he owned the "dream house," living on his upper floor, the cheerful coals piled high in the grate, shutting out the yellow fog that folded the bare Park in silence. He was happy, his own master, hypnotized by his work. There was no such woman as Fiammetta. She was mythical, like the Phœnix, and the flame of his passion burnt out.

But he wasn't satisfied with his book.

He brought to it not only the keen criticism that is the result of a holiday from writing but the judgment of a man released from the fear of interruption. He could see it now as a whole, distinct from his favourite chapters, brilliant but lacking depth, a caricature of the life around him.

One night, in disgust, he decided to burn it and start afresh—on a "masterpiece!" At the last moment, his courage failed him and he threw the manuscript into a drawer. In locking it, he was seized by a doubt. Time—it was all a question of time. Could he afford those wasted months? There was Arkwright to consider. Damn Arkwright! He picked up his pen.

He was deep in the framework of a plot that had haunted him persistently when the telephone bell sounded. The sudden noise startled him. Frowning, he reached for the receiver. Who could it be at this hour? To his amazement, his curt enquiry was answered by Pierre de Lusignan.

"Just back from Monte Carlo. Your wife asked me to ring you up and give you the latest news. They started yesterday in the car along the coast of Italy—wanted a change of scene. I saw them off. At the rate they left I should say they'd be in *Rome* to-morrow!"

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"No?" Torquil was thinking it out. "Is Letts driving?"

"In a sense. He's holding the steering-wheel." Pierrot's careful English accent admitted a throaty "r," sure trace of Gallic amusement. "More truthful to say it was driving him! But Providence protects its Puffins. I don't think you need be nervous. Anyhow, that's the message—and to ask how the book's progressing?" Again that betraying consonant.

"Going splendidly," said Torquil, his knee pressing the locked drawer in which the discarded work lay. "Just the four of them?" he inquired.

"Yes. Letts the proud Pasha."

Torquil wondered. All he said was:

"Well, you've come back to nice weather."

"Charming! The fog in the Channel was like cream cheese—delayed us hours. Difficult, too, to get a taxi. I've only just achieved dinner—my excuse for troubling you so late. But my conscience——" He broke off and laughed. "There's something about a London fog that explains the British conscience. By the way, I was to tell you that their address is nebulous, too, but they'll call for letters at Genoa, care of the *Crédit Lyonnais.*"

"Thanks. Very good of you." Torquil hoped it sounded hearty. He added lightly, "My wife all right?"

"Quite—though we all lost money the last night at the Club and returned home in bad tempers. Mademoiselle Minx tried to arrange a suicide in the Gardens, with a hazy idea of obtaining petrol to expedite her departure. Unluckily, it rained."

"A pity," Torquil drily agreed. He wished Lusignan good night and hung up the receiver.

He was puzzled. It was so unlike his wife to go off with a trio that contained no worthy cavalier. And what had brought Pierrot home before the end of his leave? A quarrel? Or had he taken an old friendship too seriously —misjudged Fiammetta?

The gnawing doubt was followed by a fierce longing for her presence. It swept over him in a wave of physical lone-

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liness and desire which gave way to a touch of panic. The car, Letts, that dangerous road, and the vague knowledge Torquil possessed of the party's whereabouts? She might be lying dead at this moment, or crippled, at some wayside inn.

He shuddered, his head on his hands, mastered by his imagination, his fatal habit of conjuring up swift pictures vivid in line and detail. Dead—a broken marble statue, the exquisite flame of life extinguished, whilst her spirit, ever withheld from him, danced "burning, through the night. . . ."

He had always felt that underneath the brilliant beauty, warmth and light of that Southern shore there lurked some horror: a pagan indifference to pain, and a silent defiance of man and his pleasure. In that land where at dead of night the doors of the gay hotels stole open to let a consumptive's coffin pass. Why had he left her, deserting his post? Through a mad impulse of jealousy. Mad, since Pierrot was *not* her lover. No lover would throw aside the chance of the intimate possibilities of that frivolous, complaisant party, the lady he loved by his side in the car. He was only a "habit," as Nan had averred. In that moment, Torquil would have renounced all his ambitions to know that she lay, safe, in the great gold bed below; Fiammetta, her face pure as a child's, her glittering plaits across the pillow.

He tried to believe *she* was there, to achieve sanity by the same power of imagination that had conjured up disaster; but the effort failed miserably. Did every man suffer like this, caught in the toils of the flesh, or was it the sensitive doom of the author?

His mind went off at a tangent—the book? There could be no question now of destroying *Quenched Fires*. (An ominous title it seemed to him as he thought of those curves in the Corniche road.) He must finish it—satisfy Arkwright—and go in quest of his wife. He began to calculate the time this would take, and his nostrils curled. An easy task. The "happy ending," love triumphant, marriage bells—

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the author's tongue in his cheek. It would be a popular novel; women would call it "sweetly pretty" where they missed the skit on well-known people—Torquil writhed. More than ever, he recognized its defects. It would not add to his reputation on the literary side.

The memory of Merriman and a long-forgotten speech rose up like a phantom from the grave: "If an author wants to be *respected*——"

Behind this, yet another vision. The dingy room in Pimlico, with the far-off notes of the cornet-player, and himself, on his knees, his hot face pressed against a shabby sleeve, crying aloud: "I've *done* it!"

A coal fell clattering to the hearth and he came back to the present. Stiffly, he stooped, unlocked the drawer and threw the manuscript on the table.

After this, events moved quickly, upsetting all his calculations. A hurried line from Fiammetta announced that the car had broken down—some trouble with the engine. They were stranded at Alassio in a little hotel wedged between "a dirty beach and a walled town, picturesque but full of smells." Her next grievance was the weather. Three days of mistral and wild rain. Impossible to motor through it; Audrey had a sore throat. Finally an imperative wire:

"Home Tuesday, dinner at eight."

His relief was tempered by the fear of frustration at the last moment. She might elect to stay in Paris with the rest of the party in the serious pursuit of clothes, or be taken by some fresh caprice. In the depths of his heart he was certain that disappointment awaited him.

It did. He went to the station to meet the crowded continental train, missed her, tore up and down the platform, and arrived back in Park Lane to find her on the doorstep, smiling and calm, saying good-bye to an elderly Major, very correct, a fellow-traveller from Paris, who had suavely insisted on seeing her home. They parted, and she greeted her husband.

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"Well?" She gave him her cheek to kiss. "How are you?" She turned away to scrutinize a pile of letters.

"I'm—all right." His voice was jerky. "I went to meet you at Charing Cross, but somehow——"

She interrupted him.

"Has a box come? From Albergo? I picked up the loveliest old clock in a dirty little shop there—a real bargain! I'll tell you about it as soon as I've had a bath. The only pleasant day we had in that God-forsaken spot—though the Minx nearly got bitten." She added calmly, "By a wolf."

Torquil stared at her.

"A *wolf?*"

"Yes. In the Cathedral. It was chained up, like a dog, in the porch. To keep out sinners, I suppose? Or to suggest poverty—it was close to the Poor-box—the proverbial 'wolf at the door'! The Minx *would* tease it until a priest warned her it was dangerous. Fascinating, to see it snap! The luggage?" She answered his enquiry. "Oh, Major Gage is seeing to that. I couldn't wait for the Customs." She was moving on up the stairs and she called back over her shoulder, "I've brought you a present, Torquil. A very old French edition of the *Decameron,* with divine illustrations—though rather improper!" She laughed. "There's a rival Fiammetta! Perhaps you will see the likeness?"

Tongue-tied, Torquil followed, aware of the faint, familiar scent that floated back from her loosened veil. Would she notice the roses in her room?

Late that night he discovered them placed outside her bedroom door. One had fallen, the red petals like tears of pain, on the parquet.

The old life began again, the house a hive of gay young people clustering about the Queen Bee; Torquil upstairs, finding the effort of concentration increasingly hard, but bent on finishing his book. He was haunted by the book-to-be. Fiammetta's latest fancy was to conduct an orchestra. It met at all hours of the day to practise music too difficult

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for most of the amateur performers, with a maddening reiteration of faulty passages. It was torture to Torquil overhead. One morning he slammed out of the house and strode across the Park to Chelsea, determined to secure a room where he could work with some chance of silence. As he turned into his old square, a weight lifted from his spirit and instinctively he quickened his pace. His landlady greeted him with a fluttering curiosity. The romance of his marriage had cast a halo over her simple establishment. She had never expected to see him again—moving in his "high circles"—still less, to have him as a lodger.

Torquil had prepared his excuse: workmen busy in the house, his study to be repainted. Could he have his old room for a few weeks as a refuge in the daytime? Park Lane was upside-down. She knew what painters were? And he'd got a book he must finish.

Miss Withers almost wailed. A "permanent let," and the house full! She thought for a moment, her hands trembling with excitement and anxiety. Torquil meanwhile smiled at her, strangely warmed by the welcome.

"I could let you have the one beneath and give up me own to Miss Brown. Yes." She drew her thin form erect with its silk blouse and suggestion of aggressive virginity. Her pride consisted in the fact that the house had been "left" her by her father who would never have wished his daughter to "work," but: "In *these* times"—an eloquent pause, a sniff—"I see to the light dusting."

"But how about yourself?" asked Torquil and received the cryptic answer:

"I'll manage. It's a good room—the one Mr. Narundur had in your time—very pleasant in the spring." She led the way invitingly. "He's doing *locum tenens* now for a doctor in the North, but he's left some of his things with me. Those are his books." She pointed to a shelf above the washing-stand. "I'm hoping to have him back one day. Such a nice young gentleman."

Torquil recognized the phrase; another link with the past.

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"This will do first-rate, if you're sure it's not putting you about?" He moved to the window and gazed across the bare hedge to the tennis courts with a queer feeling of coming home. "From to-morrow?" His voice was eager.

Miss Withers begged a day for "the cleaning." There was Miss Brown to consider, too.

"Though I'm quite sure she'll be agreeable. A *nice* young lady—out all day." (The highest praise in her category.) "Would you want the bed moved?" As he shook his head, she ran on, "I could pack away Mr. Narundur's books—somewhere."

"There's no need." Torquil divined from the last word a lack of space.

He engaged the room and took his departure, insisting on shaking hands with Miss Withers, although with a faint hesitation she glanced at her palm and said: "I've been *dusting!*" A smell of burnt chops rose from the kitchen with its own lurid explanation. As he went down the steep steps, he heard a clock strike the hour and decided to lunch in the neighbourhood and avoid the musical contingent, crowding round his wife's table. There was one professional who played the viola—without nails! (Or that was how it struck Torquil.) Nature had not been generous at the outset in this direction and his *métier* had insisted upon a drastic shearing of the remainder. Those soft pads fingering the toast always made the author sick.

He cut across to King's Road and entered a little restaurant he had patronized in the old days. It was filling fast but he found a table and ordered the *plat du jour*. The waitress recognized him.

"You've been away, sir," she suggested, accustomed to chat with the artists who formed the main clientèle, as she swept some crumbs from the cloth.

"Yes, but I'm back now," said Torquil enjoying his private jest. "There's no place like Chelsea!"

"No, you're right. A bit far out for the theayters, but with the Palace and the Pictures——" She left the sentence unfinished and Torquil in doubt if her reference was to the

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work of her customers or to the charms of Mary Pickford, and whisked off to another guest.

From where he sat he could watch the steady stream of people passing. He decided, at length, that few women knew how to walk. They either hurried, head thrust forward, their bodies jolted from shoulder to hips, or dragged, their weight thrown on their heels. Grace was not an unconscious asset as in the Latin race. Here and there a good-looking girl, with a curious wriggle from the waist, her shoulders hunched, slim body slanting backwards, aimed at effect, unaware that only the halo of youth preserved her from ridicule. The elderly women adopting this pose would have moved a sculptor to tears. But presently, threading her way through the others, came a figure light as thistledown, inconspicuous, neatly dressed, yet utterly pleasing to Torquil's senses; silver furs about her shoulders, a hint of silver in her hair, grey eyes lost in thought. Without effort she seemed to avoid contact with the heedless crowd, moving irresistibly forward on her slender, arched feet. In front of the restaurant she paused, considered the place for a moment and entered. It was Josephine.

Torquil, apprehensive, watched her. Their eyes met and he saw her recoil. She bowed coldly and passed his table, but the room beyond him was full. The busy waitress bustled up and drew out the chair facing Torquil's.

"There's a seat here, madam," she called to the guest.

Josephine turned slowly. Torquil felt the blood rush up to the roots of his smooth, black hair, as he realized her reluctance.

"Please?" He stood up. "I've finished." An obvious mis-statement; his plate was still full, his glass of beer barely touched.

He looked so like a guilty schoolboy that Josephine's sense of humour warred with her nervous annoyance. She realized that any suggestion of a scene in this narrow, crowded space would be too humiliating. Already people were watching the couple.

"Oh, how do you do?" Quietly she accepted the situation.

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"Don't let me disturb your lunch." She settled herself in the vacant seat and became immersed in the bill of fare.

"You're sure?"

"Of course." She smiled faintly.

He sat down, aware of yielding to an overmastering temptation yet uncertain of the issue. As she drew off her grey gloves and he saw, beneath his lowered lids, her fragile hands bare of rings save for the worn wedding-band, memory had him at her mercy. With the dramatic sense of contrast that every true writer knows he was swept back to another scene; the sun-filled space of the *Réserve,* with the swarthy chattering Marseillaises—those exuberant children of the South—and the glittering sea beyond the windows, in that coveted *tête-à-tête* on the day Kate had left the Villa. Bitterness flooded him. He looked up.

"Mrs. Merriman?"

Josephine had given her orders for a meal, the main idea of which was speed: cold meat, a cup of coffee. Resenting the present contretemps, she was yet startled by the pain in Torquil's voice when he addressed her.

"Yes?"

"This is horrible," he murmured. "Don't you think you could forgive me?"

She did not answer, but he saw her glance falter and the stars in her eyes become veiled, a sign as he knew well of some trouble of the spirit. He went on, gaining courage:

"I know what you must have thought. But I couldn't tell—I had no idea that Mr. Merriman was ill. *Afterwards,* I was sorry—too nervous to write to you. But what you can't understand, is all that lay behind my action. The necessity——" He paused and stammered. "My m-marriage—I *had* to get on, to make money. Everything hinged on that."

"Yes?" It was non-committal. He could feel her loyalty at bay and was sharply aware of his mistake.

"Of course, in time, with your husband—— But I couldn't afford time, you see." Desperately he forged

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ahead. "It *looked* like ingratitude—but it wasn't—I've never forgotten your kindness. I couldn't. I owe you both too much. I've always hoped one day to meet you and explain."

She interrupted him with a slight but commanding gesture.

"You can't explain to the dead, Torquil. That is one of the bitter lessons of life."

He winced.

"No. I suppose it's too late. Altogether. For you, as well."

Silence followed this conclusion. Josephine made no effort to break it. The waitress appeared with a plate of cold beef. In handing the potatoes she brushed off Josephine's loose furs. Torquil stooped and retrieved them. A faint scent of lavender rose from the satin lining.

"Lavender!" His voice broke. For the word held subtle memories.

She glanced at him covertly and saw that the tears stood in his eyes. Amazed and shocked, she lowered her own. *Torquil,* moved to this extent? He meant it then, the plea for forgiveness? The boy was wretched and sincere in his tardy repentance. All her generous soul was stirred; her thoughts moved swiftly forward. Success had not brought him happiness. He had hinted at some pressure behind his ungracious conduct. She would take him at his word. Impulsively, she leaned towards him.

"It was not for myself. It hurt—Richard."

He nodded, his lips compressed, and swallowed a lump that rose in his throat, ashamed of his sudden weakness.

"But you—now?" He caught his breath. For the mist had cleared from her eyes; they shone, full of the old light with that curious swift dilation—the "stars" of his happy days.

She smiled, yet sadness lingered in the sensitive curve of her lips.

"Since you ask for it—absolution. Such a beautiful word, isn't it, Torquil? You used to be fond of words."

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He tried to answer but was tongue-tied. He could only look his gratitude. She saw this, and, compassionate, talked on in a lighter vein giving him time to recover.

"You should have been with me this morning. I've been interviewing a new housemaid—that's how I came to Chelsea—with an amazing vocabulary of the latest slang. Or it seemed so to me, but perhaps I'm out of date. She's going to 'try' my situation, though we haven't a cinema at Westwick! It was touch and go until I said the chauffeur was a good dancer and that they had a gramophone with the latest 'jazz' in the servants' hall. I was thankful to get her." Josephine sighed. "I hate being dragged to London now."

"Yes. I can understand that," said Torquil. "I often wish I lived in the country."

"Not satisfied with Park Lane?" Her delicate brows were raised with an unexpected touch of mischief.

"Oh—it's all right," said Torquil lamely.

Josephine's smile vanished. He did not look a happy man for all his air of prosperity.

"And your work?" she inquired gently.

"I'm finishing a new book that's overdue. It was interrupted by a visit to Monte Carlo—where, by the way, I met Mrs. Rollit. We talked of you, and the happy week at Les Lecques. She was looking just the same, with 'Maurice' discreetly on guard, and not to be blamed when *zéro* turned up! She told me solemnly that it 'wasn't good' for her to win."

He laughed, but Josephine was aware of his evasion. In the old days her leading question anent his writing would have brought from him an eager response. Had his ambition worn itself out? She judged him to be too clever a man to remain content with his present success, conscious, too, that of late the reviews had been falling off, the critics indifferent. What had happened to Torquil? Was this the result of his marriage? She became aware of her silence.

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"Yes, I heard from Kate of your meeting." She added deliberately, "And of how much she admired your wife."

"So she told me." His voice was cold.

Josephine felt slightly rebuffed. She had intended to seal her forgiveness by asking him for a day to Westwick. Now her sensitive pride recoiled from the notion of his dreaming that it could pave the way to an introduction to the well-known woman he had married. She glanced at her watch.

"I mustn't miss the three o'clock train. I meant to have lunched at the station, but this little place looked homely and I was feeling rather hungry after an early breakfast."

The light died out of Torquil's face.

"So soon? Won't a later train do?" As she shook her head he was seized by a happy thought. "Anyhow, you'll let me drive you to the station?"

She was touched by his evident desire to prolong the unlooked-for meeting.

"I mustn't interrupt your work."

"Oh, if *that* were the only interruption!" He checked himself—too late! Josephine had guessed a part of the burden of his daily life. He met the sympathy in her eyes and yielded to a sudden impulse. 'Do you remember I once told you that an author had no right to marry? Not if he wanted to succeed."

"Yes, but I didn't quite agree. I think home life is good for a man."

Torquil shrugged his shoulders.

"There's no home life in London—my principal objection to it. All this eternal gadding about! One might as well live in an hotel. However——" He signed to the waitress who brought him both accounts.

Josephine guessed his intention and checked it.

"Oh, no, Torquil! I'd sooner settle for my own."

"Please!" He looked at her wistfully, then covered his earnestness with a jest. "I can really afford a slice of cold beef and a twopenny potato now! It's not a lunch at the *Réserve*."

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She gave way unwillingly. Although the rupture was healed on the surface, she could not trust the man before her and she shrank from being indebted to him. Yet the fact that he had offered to pay—Torquil, so chary of his money—seemed to prove his sincerity. A faint sense of amusement seized her as she watched him carefully add up the figures and bestow sixpence on the waitress with the air of a conqueror.

With her concession his mood changed. Unconsciously she had given him the tonic his pride was clamouring for, and his vanity reawoke. He helped her into the taxi with a possessive gallantry that brought a grin to the driver's face, and sat down at his ease beside her, sprawling his long legs. He felt absurdly elated. Josephine had not forgotten those sunlit days at Les Lecques: the days of her tender care, and of Merriman's patronage. Even now the latter fact rankled, prompting him to assert himself. All the way to the station he played the part of a man of the world, well-known in Society. "*My* house, *my* car," slipped from his lips with a careless assumption that just missed the effect he desired. Once she interrupted him, inwardly weary of his *blague:*

"And you get on well with Arkwright?"

He smiled back with a curl of his nostrils.

"Arkwright has to get on with me. He knows which side his bread is buttered!"

Josephine nodded without comment. She recognized the old mood, intensified by the power of money acquired mainly through his marriage. She wondered how his wife liked his monopoly of her possessions. It was impossible that Torquil could have made a fortune by his books, a sum to cover his mode of living. Her earlier pity for him had vanished. It was with a sigh of relief that she leant back in the railway carriage as the train puffed out of the terminus and she caught a last glimpse of the author, standing, as if he had just saluted his superior officer, but with an air of owning the station.

"He's not improved," she said to herself. "Unless it's

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a pose, to hide disillusion? You can never tell with a man like Torquil. I wonder if I've acted wisely?"

Her head ached and she felt oppressed by an unwarranted sense of guilt, already regretting their chance meeting. For Josephine was faced anew with a problem that had been haunting her like a shadow for many weeks: the rights of the living over the dead.

Had she erred in forgiving Torquil? He was still connected in her mind with her husband's sudden death. Although she had learned later from Heron that Richard's heart had been affected seriously for many months, it was Torquil who had brought the last shock to her beloved, bitter words and disillusion. Had she been weak through sudden pity?

Yet forgiveness was a divine command. Could a woman be *too* loyal to the memory of the dead?

She tried to thrust the thought from her. Her long mourning had been sincere to the point of dismissing Heron at the end of his self-set term of probation. Oh, that scene! Could she ever forget it? Heron, his strong, ugly face broken up by virile passion, and the glimpse she had caught of unknown depths before he had mastered his despair. His abrupt departure from Westwick had brought not relief but loneliness. She was frightened by her own sensations. For Heron, absent in the flesh, haunted each hour of the empty days and his spirit was with her when she slept. She learned what it was to long for his voice calling to her across the garden, for the familiar clasp of his hand, and, deep down in her soul, she knew that she missed him more than Richard.

Only loyalty stood in the way, and now she had failed the dead man, readmitting Torquil to her friendship. Did Torquil always bring trouble to those who took an interest in him? Heron had never liked the man. He would disapprove of her present conduct. What a bitter business life was! To be true to oneself and others—the living as well as the dead.

She thought of Torquil's changed face, the lines that

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spoke of suffering deepened, yet a certain coarseness about the mouth that had replaced its stern repression. He wasn't happy, although he boasted. Josephine sighed. Was anyone happy, after childhood? She drew her furs tighter about her and stepped out on to the little platform.

A cloud of dust rolled down to meet her as the car throbbed up the steep hill, and she closed her eyes wearily, then blindly surrendered herself to the fanciful sensation of flying, far detached from the earth, through the frosty spaces of the air. There was only the gentle motion of skimming the slight inclines of the country road, with the noise of the wind in her ears and the faint rustle of bare-branches. Her body swayed as they took the curve where Sister Ann peered down the lane and she came to herself with a start under the long stone wall. Mechanically she got out at the porch and was followed by the chauffeur with the fish-mat and her parcels.

"You can put them down. Ah, here's Mathews! Good night, Morris."

"Good night, madam." The chauffeur touched his cap and was off again to the garage.

Loneliness confronted her. The house seemed immense, uninhabited. She escaped from it to the garden, crossed the lawn aimlessly and opened the door in the wall. Everywhere was the promise of spring, still invisible but heralded by the slow rising of the sap, the swollen tips of tiny boughs. Spring—there was no spring for her; only autumn that stretched out chill hands to an eternal winter.

She walked down the gravel path. A faint tapping caught her ear. It might be a wood-pecker, or a nut-hatch in the old pear-tree? So she came to Sister Ann; waiting, endlessly waiting, too, for Time to stoop with his shining sickle.

The tapping had ceased. There followed a sound more violent, the crash of a hammer falling on the stone steps. She looked up and saw Heron, his coat off, on a ladder, a trail of creeper loose about him, his blue eyes fixed on her face.

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"Oh!" Her hands went to her breast where her heart seemed to have stopped beating. She could not stir, though her limbs shook, nor think, nor speak coherently. But in a moment the strange feeling of paralysis was swept aside. For Heron made a false movement; the ladder slipped and she sprang forward.

"David!" The fear rang out in her voice.

He saved himself by a clumsy effort, the ladder clattering to the ground, to find her fragile arms about him, her hands in a frenzied clutch on his sleeve. It was only fright, he told himself, but her touch ran through him like a spear.

"Disgraceful, the state of this creeper," he grumbled, trying to control his voice. "Good thing I'm home again. I can see a fortnight's work before me."

Her face changed, grew desolate.

"A fortnight?" she whispered, moving back.

He gave her a searching glance.

"For longer—if you really want me?"

Her lips quivered. Into her eyes there leaped the sign for which he had waited, that Merriman had never known, of passion completing love. Heron needed no other answer.

"At last!" He had her in his arms. Suddenly his clasp relaxed. "Was I rough?" His voice broke on the word.

He heard her laugh beneath her breath.

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CHAPTER XXIII

TORQUIL sold the serial rights of his finished book to a magazine which, with a new editor, had started a fresh lease of life after a period of inanition.

In the old days at Pimlico the author had found a fitful market for his short stories with Clement Frazer, then editing an obscure weekly and on the look out for dramatic stuff by an unknown man at the lowest price. He prided himself on "discovering" Torquil and this influenced his decision. Lacking social experience, he believed that *Quenched Fires* was a faithful portrait of the set that gathered round the author's wife. As a matter of fact the book belonged to that class of "society novel" which relies on exaggeration and caricature for its effect. For Torquil, in his bitterness, had ridiculed the well-known folk who nodded to him and passed on.

Arkwright divined the hidden malice and rubbed his hands well pleased. Here was the very type of novel he himself had recommended. He congratulated Torquil warmly:

"Excellent, my dear chap! The best thing you've done so far. You show up the vices and the folly of the people in the swim but take a firm line yourself on the question of morality. It will win you the Nonconformist Press. Just look what they did for Carrie Morell? *Made* her! That portrait of old General Merton is very funny. Yes, I guessed that!" He chuckled and raised his glass to Torquil, his guest, that day, at Arkwright's favourite resort for lunch. "I prophesy a big success."

Yet the author, at times, felt nervous. He was having his revenge, but what would Fiammetta say? She might smile at his portrait of the Puffin, blindly scorching through the dust, but there were other, more intimate friends whose

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habits he had parodied. *Tant pis!* He shrugged his shoulders. His chance meeting with Josephine had reawakened his vanity and added a spark to his rebellion. Josephine had not forgotten. Ah, he could have written there! In the tower sacred to Sister Ann, soothed by his lady's gentle presence and her belief in his genius. What a blind fool he had been to mistake headlong passion for love —the "path of moonlight" for the flame that had scorched his self-respect. Although he did not go to see her, Josephine's presence haunted the room that overlooked the Chelsea Square, where he would sit with an idle pen, dreaming until he became aware of the scent of lavender. His next book must be hers—worthy of her inspiration! But his energy was spent. He was in the condition all authors know when imagination lies fallow, waiting for some door to open and reveal new worlds beyond.

Fiammetta deferred reading the novel until its appearance in book-form. So she explained to Torquil. She was sitting for an Academy portrait and this had reawakened her old interest in Art. Music was as dead as Dancing. Now, she was to be found at Private Views and studios, the centre of a group of critics, learning and passing on her knowledge to her faithful court of admirers. She saw very little of her husband. She believed him to be immersed in his work. But one day she received a letter that puzzled and annoyed her from Nan, now married to Trevelyan and happy in her country life. She had picked up Frazer's magazine in her dentist's waiting-room and attracted by Torquil's name on the cover had included it in her list of subscriptions. Her indignation knew no bounds as the story developed and there appeared a shadowy figure, deeply religious, the owner of a dirty house, a bad cook and high ideals. It was Lady Mary, dragged through the mud. But why? Torquil had received nothing but kindness from her hands. Suddenly Nan remembered an amusing mistake at her wedding. Lady Mary, vague as ever, had discovered Torquil standing alone by the long table covered

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with presents and, in a moment of aberration, had confused him with the hired detective. Another man would have seen in it merely material for a jest, but Torquil had nursed a secret resentment, magnifying the incident.

A month passed, bringing with it further instalments of the novel, Fiammetta watchful but silent. One evening, the storm broke.

They had dined alone in comparative silence and were smoking over their coffee, safe from further interruption. Fiammetta emptied her cup, extinguished the end of her cigarette and looked up.

"I've been reading your serial, Torquil."

"Really?" He tried to appear indifferent. "I'm flattered! I thought you were waiting until you could have it in book form." He added, too lightly, "How does it strike you?"

"I am amazed at your lack of taste." Her voice was calm but the sense of her anger invaded Torquil, a menace that filled the silent room. He braced himself for the conflict.

"I don't in the least follow you."

"No?" Her wonderful eyes narrowed. She looked at her husband with open contempt. "How dare you ridicule my friends?"

"Dare?" He echoed the word, head thrown back, chin thrust forward. "I suppose an author has the right to select his own characters? Naturally I take as my models the people who come to our house."

"*My* house." For the first time in their married life she swept aside the polite subterfuge.

"Exactly." He saw his chance. "The reason why my books have to *pay*. I take the 'copy' I see around me, in the hope that shortly I may be relieved from my present painful position of being forced to live at a rate that far exceeds what I earn." He leaned forward, arrogant. "You must understand this is *your* wish. Not mine. I should prefer your keeping your money and that I should take my proper place as your husband and master of the house. But

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this would entail a modest establishment in the suburbs, with strict economy."

She gave a low scornful laugh.

"I can see you living there! The great Torquil—in lodgings at Acton. I'm afraid it would spoil your position with Arkwright, who has such a—delicate discrimination where his authors are concerned. But the point is not our manner of living. When I married you, I made it plain that we should share a common purse. You remember, that was the arrangement?" Torquil winced but she went on, each word clearly articulated, no tremor in the delicate hands clasped lightly on the table. "I believed then that I could trust you to behave like a man of honour. I have met a good many authors, men of mark, and have read their books. What you say may be true—that their characters are drawn from life—but the identity of the subjects is not made common property. In your case the victims of your ill-placed wit require no names. There is no mistaking Lady Mary—a woman to whom you are indebted and whose daughter claims to be your friend. If it had not been for her kindness, you would never have come to my house. She is a part of that success for which you are ready to sell your soul. But there are worse things in your book." Her voice rose with a note of anger. "You have caricatured old General Merton—a gallant old soldier respected by all. You even localize his house and mention his lameness, the result of a wound received in the Boer War. And only last week we dined with him! You sat there and enjoyed a poor man's hospitality—for in these days he *is* poor—knowing that you had painted him as a senile, foolish old man gloating over past glories."

"I did not!" Torquil flung back. "I showed him as he is. A man with one foot in the grave, yet to be found at every dance hobbling round with the prettiest girl! It's ridiculous, and the sooner he knows it, the better. He *is* a figure of fun. Besides that, he's the type that nearly lost us the war, full of hide-bound prejudices and exploded army tactics. He's fair 'copy' to any author."

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"Yet you can eat his bread and salt?" Her face was incredulous.

"'By courtesy' only." Torquil sneered. "I go there in your train. Why should I be grateful to him?"

"Why should you *go?* There's no compulsion. If you feel like that—unwanted—surely your pride would show you a way of evading the invitation?" She paused for a moment, studying the morose face of the man before her, feeling the gulf grow between them. Her manner changed. All trace of her anger disappeared. She was now his judge, dispassionate and merciless. "Torquil, I'm going to speak plainly. You have been given every chance. When I married, all the doors of my friends were thrown wide to receive my husband. But your vanity blinded you to their welcome. You were gauche, surly and suspicious. You wished to be fêted for yourself as a great man—the coming author. You were not great. I doubt now if you ever will achieve greatness. A man who prostitutes his talent for the sake of indulging his private spite has sold his literary birthright. You have written nothing which can compare to the strength that marked your earliest work. You have lost touch with the truth, through your inordinate desire for *personal* recognition. For you do not love your work for itself. It is a ladder for your ambition. You use people and throw them aside, sneering at those who are well-bred, yet ashamed of your own origin. You treat the world as you treated your parents. Yes, I know your history."

She averted her eyes on the final words, obeying an impulse as old as the name she had laid down in taking Torquil's. She could strike hard, but she could not stoop to enjoy the sight of her foe unhorsed. She rose, finding relief in action, and moved across to a bureau that stood with its back to the window. Torquil, stunned, followed her movements as a dog watches for the whip.

She *knew*—— But his brain refused to act. It was paralysed by the sudden blow. He saw her pull out a narrow drawer, feel behind the pigeon-holes and extract from this secret hiding-place an envelope carefully sealed.

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She broke it open. Inside was a photograph; a group composed of five men in their early youth, taken at Cambridge. She laid it down in front of Torquil.

"I found this among my brother's papers. Signed. The names are written beneath. The one you bear is a common one. I had never before connected it with a certain story of Cambridge days—of a friendship that proved unworthy. Jinks had no secrets from me. Thank God, he died without knowing. But I have known—all these years."

There came a sudden interruption. The servant entered with a salver on which was a note for Fiammetta.

She frowned as she took it.

"Any answer?"

The man explained nervously that the bearer had not waited. She nodded and he retired, bearing the salver like a shield pressed against his wounded heart. He greatly admired his mistress and she rarely spoke to him so sharply.

Torquil, with a feeling of nightmare, watched his wife read the note. Even now, in his despair, his trained perceptions recognized the sloping letters of the address written with a pointed pen. It was from Pierre de Lusignan.

She was so still that he wondered. Her lips were parted, incredulous; the lowered lids of her eyes hid from him her secret thoughts. Not a muscle of her body moved. At last she folded the single sheet and replaced it in its envelope. She seemed to have forgotten Torquil. She stood there, staring into space. He could bear the strain no longer.

"Fiammetta?"

She gave a start and a faint colour stole into her cheeks. Her eyes were so filled with light when she turned them bewildered, to his face that he thought of transparent sea-water, the sunshine piercing a summer wave.

"Oh!" She glanced from him to the clock. "Yes—it's time they cleared away." And with this absurd, inadequate phrase, she went out, leaving him alone.

Alone—with his rancour and amazement. What could you make of a woman like that, who could forget her accusations—words that had bitten into the flesh—and dismiss the

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subject in this fashion, her whole mind and soul elsewhere?

Remote? She had always been remote. He had never possessed her, not for a second. Only the beautiful shell, in which her spirit dwelt eternally apart from him. Was it because she thought her husband beneath contempt? Torquil writhed at this first sign of his awakening intuition. His eyes fell on the photograph, faded but recognizable; on Lyddon, the tall, central figure and his own, cross-legged at his hero's feet, Boscawen, playing the fool on his left, with Croft, a hand on Torquil's shoulder laughing because old Davernant had sneezed just as the shutter snapped. How it all came back to him, those short-lived hours of his triumph when he had been Lyddon's friend! Ghosts—all those clear-skinned boys, with their laughter and dreams and their undimmed hopes, their careless belief in the future.

And now. . . .

She had known, all these years; as she lay by his side in the great gold bed, Lyddon's face mocking him. Torquil's head went down on his hands, shrinking from the shaded lights and the picture of that room which belonged to his wife, its luxury and its perfect taste. *"My* house." He could hear her voice, cool, controlled, with that faint amusement more wounding than any anger. For a space, in which Time ceased to count, he drained the cup of bitterness. Then, like a sudden flash of light across the black depths of despair came the first stir of imagination. If he were writing this——? There *must* be some way out. Deliberately he thrust aside reality and turned to fiction. *Of course!* His head came up with a jerk, his forehead wrinkled in the effort of concentration. The victim would vindicate himself, easily, without manner of doubt. He would show that the blood in his veins was as noble as that of the woman who scorned him. And Torquil could do the same.

Squire Pomfret's son! He was sure of it. A bastard—as Oliphant had called him in those far-off days of his childhood and of their fight behind the wood stack—but her equal, on his father's side. If he could prove this wild romance, it would put the dead man in the wrong. He

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could face Fiammetta then, the old lie that had followed him like a snake from his college days slain.

Now he searched the photograph eagerly for some resemblance in that youthful portrait of himself, to the man who had paid for his schooling. No, there was no help here. He noticed with a touch of scorn that yet held something tender in it—the tenderness which youth evokes—the length of his hair, brushed back, without parting, from his forehead. In those days he had written verses. A ribald memory tripped him up. Of an evening stroll down King's Parade in which his "hyacinthine locks" had evoked the jeers of a party of Freshmen following noisily in his wake. He could hear now the irreverent chorus as they swung behind him, arm in arm:

"Go and get yer hair cut, yer hair cut, yer hair cut! . . ."

It annoyed him, even at this distance, an insult to his dignity and the status of an author.

He picked up the photograph and hid it in an inner pocket. With a glance at the clock, he switched off the lights. Half-way up the stairs he paused. As he crossed the landing outside her room, he heard the key of his wife's door turn sharply in the lock. He laughed aloud. He hoped she had heard him. He didn't care. His passion was dead. He reached his study and began a hunt for the A.B.C. Here it was! He turned the pages hurriedly until he came to Ovingdale. The 9.40? That would do. By twelve he would be with his mother, in that prim parlour over the shop with its suite of walnut furniture and the enlarged photographs of *his* parents—the man he hated—adding the last touch of provincial respectability to the ugly but prosperous room. He could feel again the irritation of a certain chair in hard plush that pricked the back of his bare calves as he balanced himself on the edge of it, holding an illustrated Bible that formed his Sunday literature, and hear his mother's frightened whisper: "Don't fidget, dear. You'll wake Father."

His mother—— An odd stab of pain and revolt ran through Torquil. With the pitiless vision of the writer, he

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could see her face, incredulous, then broken up with joy and pain as he stood before her, "raised from the dead"; her fear of the man who was her master, her still more tragic fear of himself. Fear—the keynote of his boyhood.

He shivered, aware that it haunted him still. It had underlain his avoidance of passion in the early days of his struggle with life. Now, thank God, he was free of that! Freed, for ever, from Fiammetta and the old ache of desire. It had gone with this last blow to his pride. Ah, he would humble her now, this wife of his who resembled her brother. He would make her take back her words. As to his mother, it was justice. She had cast the shadow over his life by her early weakness—passion again! He could not afford to be merciful.

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CHAPTER XXIV

TORQUIL sat in the bay-window of the Mitre Hotel at Ovingdale. He had the coffee-room to himself, for the hour was late, and the waiter, after serving him, had retired to his own midday meal.

The table, with its battered silver, commanded a view of the main street through a gauze screen of rusty black that shut out the gaze of the passers-by. The *Mitre* prided itself on being patronized by "the county"; a convenient halting-place in its visits for shopping or local business. Its garage and stabling were excellent and it boasted a decent cellar which compensated for poor cooking. Lapped in the pleasant coma of age and secure from competition, the *Mitre* rested on its laurels and once a year awoke to life, on the night of the Masonic Dinner.

Torquil had chosen it as being the least likely place in the town for unwelcome recognition. Facing him, across the road, was the County Bank with the same air of waiting for the Resurrection. A brand-new "International Stores"—an eye-sore of brick and terra-cotta—flanked it. Then the crooked line of ancient shops began again. From where he sat, he could catch in the distance a glimpse of the one that had sheltered his youth, saw-dust oozing from the doorway and a carcase conspicuously exposed beside the half-empty counter. He knew that the owner had retired to the little room behind the shop where the faint, sour smell of meat persisted and still lingered in Torquil's nostrils. He tingled at the recollection of the morning's scene in that narrow space, anger still his most vivid emotion. It had survived the sense of shock.

For his mother was dead—had been dead four years—and the butcher had found a fresh wife in the shape of the

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minister's eldest daughter. This had increased his sense of power. A man of means and a shining light in chapel circles, he met Torquil, not on equal grounds, but as his superior, amused by the "prodigal's" pretensions. There was no doubt of the butcher's success—a "warm man" in Ovingdale.

From first to last he had held his own, flatly refusing to satisfy Torquil. He resented this indecent attempt to trouble "the peace of the grave." Nevertheless, he showed no desire to confirm his own share in the young man's birth, nor to kill the fatted calf for a son who had shadowed the last days of a wife duly mourned and supplanted. Let the dead bury the dead. He pointed out the fact that Torquil, by his callous indifference to the feelings of his parents, had forfeited any further claim to consideration.

To Torquil's success he paid no tribute. An author? Hm! The "line" might suit him. He had always been ready with a "lie and a flimsy yarn," as a child, to cover his misdemeanours. He was "good at his schooling" certainly, but "book-learning" wasn't all. He wouldn't have made an honest tradesman. A good thing he had cut adrift. He wasn't wanted in Ovingdale.

Ovingdale!—Torquil had laughed in his face. Unwisely he launched out on the change in his circumstances. The butcher listened, unmoved, with an inward conviction of roguery somewhere, and a marriage that was the result of the loose morals peculiar to London. He took it with a grain of salt, this glib and amazing story, but was not backward in his opinion when Torquil, at last, paused for breath.

"So that's the reason you lay hid, whilst your mother was breaking her heart for you? Ashamed of your parents, eh? Amongst all your fine new friends. *Us*—as paid for your education, and stinted ourselves to bring you up." His heavy face worked suddenly. "She was crying out for you at the end." As though he dreaded the memory, he let loose his pent-up wrath: "Get out of my house! I've done with you. May God above judge between us and humble your pride in the dust!"

So sudden was the onslaught that Torquil retreated.

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The past, revived, threatened to engulf the present. He shrank before the man who had bullied him and his mother —"for her soul's good"—from that clenched hand with its white flesh on which the hairs shone like copper, and the gross body, vibrant with passion. But on the threshold, he turned round, aware of his lost dignity.

"I owe you nothing! You're not my father. Squire Pomfret paid for my education."

"Oh, you know *that!*" stormed the butcher. "Then you'd best ask him to tell you the rest!"

"I will," said Torquil, between his teeth.

Now, as he played with the food before him, he realized that his boast held the remaining shred of hope. He would tackle Squire Pomfret. He took another glass of wine—it would need all his courage. He had ordered Burgundy, though he would have preferred beer, mindful of a chance remark treasured from his early days anent the cellars of the *Mitre* and "the gentry's" opinion of its wine. As he put down his glass, the door opened and he heard the landlord's voice: "No trouble, sir." Then a louder one which stirred a chord of memory: "Bread and cheese—that's all I want! Last time I was here you had a Stilton in prime condition. Any left? Oh, and, Hodgson, a pint of stout. See to my mare. I shall want her again at four o'clock."

Torquil turned his head. He saw a man who looked like a groom, but a head groom, lord of the stables. From his stock to his worn gaiters, sport and the intimate knowledge of horse-flesh seemed to emanate, unmistakable. His face was square and red, the skin full of tiny congested veins, much wrinkled about the eyes under a low and stubborn brow. He had close-clipped, insignificant whiskers and a long upper lip that disdained moustache and betrayed humour. He was slightly bow-legged but moved briskly and he carried under his arm a parcel bound with odd bits of string.

Torquil quickly averted his gaze as the landlord steered his guest with every mark of deference to a table in the farther window.

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"Just like a book," thought the author. "Enter the long-lost parent! The reviewers would say 'Coincidence,' but it saves me a ten-mile drive."

He would not admit to himself he was nervous. The shadow of the past again! Squire Pomfret of Pomfret's Folly, a notable figure in Ovingdale. But, in London, a nonentity. He finished the bottle, preparing his speech.

The shell of the Stilton cheese appeared, carried in by the waiter, still munching.

"Good!" cried the Squire and attacked it. He buried his nose in the silver tankard, drank thirstily, gave a "Ha!" and wiped the froth from his long lip.

The waiter hovered and disappeared. Silence fell on the time-stained room. Torquil felt a paralysis creeping over his long limbs. With an effort, he rose from the table. Squire Pomfret looked up with a fleeting glance that dismissed the young man from his attention and dived into the cheese again. As Torquil approached he heard him grunt, withdrawing a greenish chunk triumphantly on the point of his knife.

"I don't think you remember me, sir? It's a good many years since we met."

"Damn!" said the Squire. The cherished morsel had fallen back into the crater. He stared blankly at the intruder. "Afraid I don't," he pronounced.

"No—I didn't expect you would." Torquil persevered. "I used to live at Ovingdale and at one time you took a certain interest in me. In fact, I believe you paid for my schooling. Through my mother." He gave her name.

"Bless my soul!" said the Squire. "Poor Lottie's son! I shouldn't have known you." His eyes ran over the well-dressed figure. "Sit down. Just a moment——" He salvaged the cheese. "Now! So you're back again? I thought you were d——" He pulled himself up and substituted, "I heard you were in the war. But that's ancient history now. I suppose you're thinking of settling down? Your father's got a good business—one of the best in the town."

"He is not my father," said Torquil.

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The Squire gave him a shrewd glance.

"You mean—— Well, of course, he's married again but you can't blame a man for that. Just pass me that butter? Thanks." He went on in a low voice, "A loss. We were fond of your mother. She nursed my poor wife, you know. Like an angel! I've never forgotten it. Well—tell me about yourself You weren't here for the funeral?"

"No." Torquil hesitated. "I didn't know until to-day that she was dead."

"Hm! Shock for you." In his sympathy and his reserve the Squire took refuge in his tankard. As Torquil made no response, he looked up over the rim. "And you, now? Married, hey?"

"Yes, I'm married and living in London. Perhaps you may have heard of my wife? She was the only sister of the late Lord Talgarth."

The Squire stared.

"The devil she was! They're connected with my family—on my mother's side. A Lyddon? Bless my soul!" He paused, digesting the strange news. "And it seems only the other day that you rode up in your father's cart to show me a prize you'd taken at school, tucked in by your mother. Poor Lottie!"

Torquil frowned. The affair was not going as he wished.

"I made good use of my schooling. After the war I started to write and I've had a considerable success. With novels—under the name of Torquil."

"Indeed?" The Squire's face was blank. "I expect my girls have read 'em. I don't go in for novels myself—not unless I'm ill in bed. Then the old ones do for me. Thackeray—and I'm fond of Sterne, though Surtees beats the lot. But this modern stuff is beyond me. All the same, I congratulate you. Any children?"

Torquil saw an opening.

"No. Before I have children, I must be certain on one point. It brought me to Ovingdale to-day, but without results. I believe, sir, that you know the whole story. I'm

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going to ask you to tell me the truth. I've a *right* to it. Who was my father?"

The Squire's knife rattled down upon his plate. He was surprised at the turn of affairs.

"Your mother didn't tell you, hey?" He spoke rather testily. This persistent young man was spoiling his lunch. Without waiting for an answer he concluded in his harsh voice, "Well, it's her secret, not mine."

"She's dead," said Torquil.

Squire Pomfret grunted, his mouth full of cheese.

"All the more reason to respect it."

"For *you*." Torquil leaned on the word. "Since you refuse to enlighten me, I can only draw one conclusion."

So far was the Squire from the speaker's intention that it took a minute for the speech to attain its full significance. He stared at Torquil, puzzled, annoyed, finally dumbfounded. His face grew purple, his eyes protruding.

"Damn your impudence!" he spluttered. "You may have run away with a Lyddon but you're no child of mine, thank God! So you got that into your head, did you? A folly of my youth, hey?" His sense of humour mastered his anger, and he laughed until the ceiling rang. "It's like a page out of *Roderick Random*. Bless my soul! I must tell old Monkton—that'll cure him of his gout!"

Torquil had sprung to his feet. He was white with anger and mortification.

"Since you deny it, give me proofs!" He shouted, his limbs shaking.

"I'd give you a jolly good hiding, young feller," the Squire retorted, wiping his eyes, "if I were a few years younger. In my salad days again, what?" He chuckled. "Proofs? Well, you shall have 'em. A letter from your precious father."

"His name?" Torquil's throat was dry, his body tense with a strange fear.

"Dupont—Henri Dupont. You're like him—the same shaped head. He wasn't a bad-looking chap. Clever as

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paint, no morals, but the best valet I ever had." A touch of pity sobered the Squire, for Torquil had clutched the back of the chair. It was evident that he suffered. "Sit down!" The old man spoke gruffly. "I'll tell you, if you'll give up that air of holding a pistol at my head! I've been a good friend to your mother and you've no right to think otherwise. But she got into trouble under my roof and my wife chose to blame herself for throwing the pair of them together." He drained his tankard. "Now, are you going to listen to me?"

Torquil, still standing, nodded. The Squire deliberately finished the remaining piece of cheese on his plate, cleared his throat and began:

"It happened abroad. The doctor had ordered my wife South and I took a Villa at Mentone. Your mother had been her maid six years—a treasure, devoted in sickness, a pretty girl and refined. She was going to be married to a young butcher in the town but, at my wife's entreaty, she put it off until the spring. He was a smug, pious chap, keen on work and chapel-going and he cut up rough at her going abroad. Disapproved of all foreigners—'Sabbath-breakers,' he called 'em!" A twinkle came into the Squire's eyes. "But I saw him myself and smoothed things over. They could count on a solid wedding-present. We went. I'd engaged the Villa servants. A cook—a damned bad one, too—and Dupont, who waited at table, valeted me and so forth. In fact, he ran the place. There was nothing he couldn't do, from making an excellent omelet to teaching me an 'infallible system' by which I lost money at the tables!" The Squire chuckled again at the memory. "An extraordinary chap—looked like a French nobleman and had served a full term in prison for robbing a former master. But this only came out later. He didn't rob *me*, so I forgive him! Lord, I can taste his salads now." He paused for breath. He was fond of spinning a yarn, but his daughters rarely permitted him to do so at home without interruption. Torquil made no comment, but his eyes were fixed on the speaker's throat. There was murder in his

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heart. "Well, where was I?" said the Squire. "Oh yes! We'd been there three months when my wife's mother died and we had to bolt back to England. No time to pack up and hand over the Villa,—hurry, confusion, wild plans. Lottie offered to stay behind and see to everything with Dupont, who was certainly capable. If I'd guessed how matters stood I'd have pitched him out by the scruff of his neck! Eventually she came home and the trouble began. To cut a long story short, she confessed to my wife that Dupont had made love to her from the start and had overcome her scruples. He'd made her the usual promises, was coming to England and so forth, but now the rogue had stopping writing, and she was going to have a child.

"Well, my wife was goodness itself. Although horribly shocked at it all, her one idea was to save Lottie from the disgrace and village gossip. It seemed unbelievable! As straight a girl as ever walked, up to that season at Mentone. Climate, perhaps? God knows!" The Squire left it to his Maker and continued with his story. "I wrote to the owner of the Villa. Dupont had gone—taken a place at Contrexeville. A doctor I knew there made inquiries through some police official—that's how the prison record came out. It also transpired that Dupont was married, but had left his wife and family to fend for themselves in Marseilles. No hope of restitution there. It nearly broke poor Lottie's heart. She was head over ears in love with the fellow. There remained the local suitor. My wife and I talked it over and the butcher seemed the only hope. Lottie was like a dead thing, utterly helpless and prostrated but willing to take our advice. I saw the man and told him the truth. I must say he behaved well, according to his own lights. He would marry her and 'save her soul,' by driving home her repentance! I remember the term he used: to 'scourge out Satan.' Horrible! What a basis for married life. I think now we were wrong, but what was the poor girl to do? There were no war babies then. It was ruin, or a hasty marriage. Bad luck! A damn fine girl." The Squire drew out a faded bandanna and blew his nose

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vigorously. "Anyhow *you* didn't suffer. When you were born I told Lottie she could look to me for your education. The butcher approved. Next to religion, he loved money. I've often noticed it goes together—long prayers and parsimony. Though they'll talk by the hour to you of 'riches in the *next* world'!" He grunted. "Well, that's the truth. I hope I've done wisely in telling you. But don't think hardly of the dead. She was an excellent mother to you and I've an idea that she paid in full for those weeks of sunshine and folly. The man was a born charmer. Mind you, he had his good points, but women were his weakness. Personal vanity! There was a woman at the bottom of that prison affair. His master's clothes happened to fit him and he yielded to the temptation. He never took anything of mine. Brains without doubt. Gad, I wish I had 'em!" He rose heavily to his feet. "I must go. I've got to see a lawyer and wrestle with the Income Tax. This damned Government's always changing the form of the burden laid on us. If you'll give me your address, I'll send you that letter from Dupont—the answer to mine at Contrexeville. It's uncommonly well written. I kept it as a curio. Just as well perhaps, hey?"

Torquil, too unnerved to respond to the grim jest, searched for a card and passed it across the table. The Squire's face as he read the address was a study. Torquil could guess his thoughts. Dazed, he found himself shaking hands with the patron of his youth and standing aside to let him pass. He knew that the hearty grip of those hard fingers was solely due to the memory of his dead mother and her years of faithful service. It added the last touch to his bitter sense of impotence.

As he moved back to his old table, he caught again that loud voice in the hall, shouting for the landlord. Then the familiar stocky form was visible through the gauze screen, with the threadbare cap, and splashed gaiters that accentuated the curve of the legs. The Squire vanished down the street, and Torquil awoke from his nightmare. He must get out of Ovingdale, where every stone in the place mocked

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him. That was his most urgent need. But he couldn't go back to Fiammetta. He must think——

By back streets, he made his way to the station and took the next train to London, a slow one with frequent halts. He had ample leisure for thought. He decided to call at the house, slip up to his room, pack a bag and go for the night, at least, to his Chelsea room. He could make up some cock-and-bull story to satisfy Miss Withers. He shrank at present from facing the truth, but in vain, he tried to escape from the memory of his interviews with the old arbiters of his boyhood. The light faded out of the sky and a storm of hail lashed the windows of the empty carriage where he sat. It was better than sunshine. It fitted in with his mood of revolt, of blind hatred for the man to whom he owed his existence. Henri Dupont—a French valet! With the vices of his race, its pitiless logic and swift thought; its lack of depth—like his last novel! A man who had missed his mark through "personal vanity"—he recalled the Squire's judgment. What was it Fiammetta had said? "Your inordinate desire for personal recognition."

By God, he would be equal with them! They belonged to the same class, his wife and that fuddled old Squire; to a country rotted by tradition. But the era of their power had passed, swept away on the tide of war. Everywhere, all over the world, Democracy was winning the race. The People now held the reins. The prophecy of his earlier work was being fulfilled. He saw himself once more the hero of that book written in his squalid lodgings. He would go back to his old faith, deny himself and become again the preacher of the Rights of Man, superior to caste and the power of money.

To hell with Society! He remembered the artist at La Turbie: "Cut adrift! It's your only chance." At any rate that father of his had bequeathed to him his full share of brains. France was the birth-place of the novel. His spirits rose. In imagination he outlined future triumphs. Torquil—the great author! What need had he of

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another name? He worked himself up until his mood produced a physical reaction. By the time he reached Park Lane, he was spent like a man after a battle. With infinite weariness, he slipped his latch-key into the door and stole into the quiet house.

Why was it so quiet? Fiammetta must be out. No sound came from the drawing-room as he passed, mounting the stairs on tiptoe. He entered his study and switched on the light. Against the clock was propped a letter addressed to him in his wife's writing. Frowning, he read the contents. They were curt and to the point. She was off to spend a week with Nan. Her movements later were uncertain. She would forward an address as soon as her plans were settled. In any case she did not intend to return to London before the season.

Relief swept over Torquil, followed by hopeless indecision. It was a struggle between his pride and his frayed nerves. His head was throbbing, his limbs seemed weighted down with iron. All power of initiative had left him. Here, at least, were rest and comfort. Yes, but Fiammetta paid.

Through the open door beyond, he could see in shadow his dressing-room, familiar and inviting. The ray of light that filtered in touched the backs of his silver brushes and the polish of old mahogany. It played, too, on the gleaming surface of his bath with its shining taps. He became suddenly aware of the smuts that had blown in from the engine, the grit and dirt of his long journey. His eyes fell on the row of boots, each pair neat on its trees, on his dressing-gown of quilted silk, his slippers in soft morocco, the heels turned in. Absurd that slippers should hold a note of tenderness! Yet all these symbols of luxury were like voices raised in chorus, in a discreet but loving welcome. He groaned, stumbled across the threshold and threw himself, vanquished, on his bed.

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CHAPTER XXV

WEEK slowly succeeded week but Fiammetta did not return.

Torquil, once more, saw the pageant of Spring, with its laughter and its light tears, dance through the Park beneath his windows. The rhododendrons were in bloom in the farther side of the Row, filled each morning with cavaliers. He avoided the crowded hours and took his walks abroad at dusk. He lived the life of a hermit, but without the consolation of work. He could not write. It seemed to him that something had snapped in his brain, the subtle cord that bound vision to the power of expression. He told himself it was physical, went to the chemist and bought a tonic. But the dry rot was in his soul. He could not even read for long. Restless, he would close the book, get up, and stare through the window. Yet he had not the energy to break away from the house. He lived in fear of his wife's return, though sometimes the cloud lifted and showed beneath a glimmer of light. *When* she returned, he would cut adrift. Meanwhile there was much to consider—Arkwright, his new book.

It was out, had been out ten days. An immediate success. His publisher triumphed. He had spared no cost in advertisement and the initial subscriptions had doubled those of the book before. Already there were "repeat orders."

A society paper had pointed out the "indiscretion" of the author. People were talking; the sales responded. Torquil's portrait met the eye in several well-known weeklies; Torquil, his head bent forward, chin propped on his hand —to support the weight of his brain—his mouth sardonic, eyes veiled in an absent melancholy: "The brilliant author of *Quenched Fires.*"

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Reading the flattering inscription, Torquil's vanity responded. He hoped that Fiammetta might see it. But the old thrill of success was missing. He had captured the public by a trick. He dared not look at his reviews.

That morning, he had heard from Arkwright asking him to call and sign some copies of *Quenched Fires* for a Charity Bazaar. Arkwright was presenting them, with others, to a titled lady, who was presiding at the Book-stall. "My friend, the Countess of D——," he called her. Torquil sneered as he read it. Better get it over at once!

He was shown in to Arkwright's room with every mark of deference, the publisher wreathed in smiles. His novel was "selling like hot cakes." A "*real* success this time!"

Torquil looked indifferent.

"It's not done so well in America. I've just had the figures. Disappointing."

Arkwright, with a wave of his hand dismissed that mighty continent. Unlike Merriman, he had no branch of his business there and was therefore less concerned with the falling-off in the sales. He suggested glibly an excuse:

"Your story's too localized, perhaps? A very subtle study of London and London society—hardly democratic enough in its outlook. They miss the finer shades. No need to worry. You've *arrived*. It's bound to tell in the end, across the Atlantic as well."

Torquil was not so sure. He had an irritating conviction that his earlier sales in America had not depended on setting and plot so much as on the fact that his characters had "rung true," were virile, and clean-living. But he thought it wiser to agree.

Arkwright invited his author to lunch but Torquil evaded the invitation, also the publisher's enquiries regarding the "book in hand." He hoped it was "on the same lines." Must "follow up your success, you know."

At last Torquil made his escape. He decided to walk home. It was one of those soft, blue days when rain in the night has washed the streets and London appears at her

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best. Before him, as he emerged from the Strand, the sunshine played on Trafalgar Square with an absence of harsh contrasts rarely seen in dryer lands. The creamy white of old stone and the dark note of the lions were softened by haze against the low façade of the National Gallery with, above, a sky void of clouds but veiled, too, a delicate azure. He paused for a moment to drink in the scene, refreshing to his tired eyes; for, of late, he had slept badly.

"Hullo, Torquil!"

Startled, he turned. Nan was laughing up at him, fully aware of his surprise and of his swift embarrassment.

"You didn't expect to see me, did you? I'm up in town for a week, shopping. With Jake—we're staying at the *Cecil*. I saw you, lost in dreams, and I felt I *must* say a word. I want to congratulate you on the success of your new book. It's a scream!" Her eyes were bright with malice as she ran on breathlessly, "You know, I never thought that you would be good at a burlesque. But it's awfully clever; that scene at Boodle's—Jake nearly had a fit! And all written so seriously as if it were real life. Your hero, too, adored by women and always giving them 'noble advice.' He *is* an ass, isn't he, Torquil? It's a *tour de force!* Like a picture of London society drawn by a curate in the suburbs!" She laughed, standing squarely before him in her countrified clothes, her cheeks browned by open air and exercise, determined to show her supreme disdain for his covert attack on Lady Mary.

"I'm glad it appeals to you," said Torquil. "Of course you're a good judge of a book."

He looked at her insolently but she showed no sign of resentment.

"Fiammetta still away?" The question seemed to amuse her as it slipped from her lips.

"She's at Brighton with Lady Letts." He tried to appear indifferent. "But they talk about a fortnight in Paris. Frocks, I suppose, for the season? If they go, I may run over and join them."

Nan narrowed her brown eyes, a trick Torquil remem-

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long in doubt.

"Pierrot's there—so he wrote to Jake. I should think he's relieved that his wife's no more! They didn't hit it off, you know."

"Dead?" He felt vaguely uneasy.

"Didn't you hear? Months ago. He's chucked Diplomacy and gone back to live at his place in France. A ripping old château near the Loire. He's invited us to stay with him, but Jake's so difficult to move. Simply hates travelling." She glanced at her watch. "I must fly! We're going to lunch with Mum and Billy. Good-bye, Torquil! Congratulations. Give us another funny book!" With a gay nod she passed on.

"He didn't enjoy *that*," she thought. "Serve him right! He's a mass of conceit. I must tell Jake." Her smile faded and was replaced by an air of married wisdom that sat quaintly on her youthful face. "No, I don't think I will. Men are—queer!"

Meanwhile Torquil narrowly missed another unwelcome encounter as he strode on up Pall Mall. Outside the Army and Navy Club, General Merton stood chatting with a friend. Torquil hurriedly crossed the road. Almost unconsciously, he wheeled to the left, past Marlborough House, away from the crowded streets peopled with his enemies. He was furiously angry with Nan. And what was wrong with that scene at Boodle's? He had never been put up for a club, aware of his social deficiencies. Had he made some idiotic slip? He tried to recall what he had written. Perhaps it was only Nan's malice?

In his absent-mindedness, when he reached the Palace he turned south—the old road to Pimlico—and only discovered his mistake at the corner of Grosvenor Place. A clock warned him of the hour. He was looking round for an omnibus that would land him at his door, aware of the arrested traffic, when his eyes fell on two ladies in a luxurious car. A cab with luggage stood in the rear, from which peered the face of a maid. The block dissolved at this

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moment and the car moved forward, carrying with it Audrey Letts—and Fiammetta!

His first sensation was one of relief at having escaped recognition; his next, the need for a definite plan of action before returning home. His thoughts in a whirl, he crossed the road and jumped upon a bus for Chelsea. He would lunch at the little restaurant and take shelter in his room. There was no doubt about his feelings. He hated her. His hands clenched as he saw again that beautiful face, her air as she leaned back against the cushion, indifferent to passing glances, so still—so insolently calm. Could nothing touch those mysterious depths? No fear—no passion, nor remorse?

Later, he sat at the rickety table in the window above the tennis courts, still searching vainly for a weapon with which to pierce his wife's pride. Leave her? Of course he would leave her, but she wouldn't care! She might be glad. He could run away with Josephine? The wild idea left his humour untouched but was denounced by his reason. She was not the woman to be led into any illicit adventure. The mere thought was sacrilege. She was not soulless, like Fiammetta. No, there was only one thing to do. Go back and get it over. Cast her riches in her teeth—show his wife he was "tired of her."

Yet he shrank from the scene, would have welcomed a respite. She had sent no instructions to Park Lane. Perhaps she was staying with the Lettses in their big house in Berkeley Square? It would be just like her to ignore her husband in this fashion; her supreme unconcern for the convention so dear to the middle classes. He was still raw from his meeting with Nan and her ridicule of his book. Had Nan known? Torquil started. He was suddenly convinced of it. She was expecting Fiammetta, had arranged a rendezvous in town. All the events of the morning, like those in a Greek tragedy, had been leading up to a climax. He could not escape from the final act.

There came a tap at the door.

"Come in!" Torquil turned his head.

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"Oh, Mr. Torquil, I'm so distressed, but the window-cleaner is here. I wonder—would you *mind?* He won't come *inside* the room, and they're so difficult to get." She was trembling with anxiety.

"It doesn't matter. I'm going out." He rose to his feet and picked up his hat. "I may be coming back, later."

"Oh, *thank* you! So unfortunate, but they're so independent now. If I send him away it may be *weeks*——" She hovered, incoherent, on the threshold of the room. "Although, if you *care* to stay, I'll tell him not to make *any* noise." With a slap, a ladder came up against the nearest window sill, followed by a heavy tread and the sound of a man clearing his throat; that dumb protest against work of the Briton after his midday meal. Torquil fled.

He found a taxi and gave the address. "For the last time," he told himself bitterly. It was nearly four when he reached the house. In the hall, he listened for her voice. Silence. He hesitated. No, he couldn't question the servants. He must act as if he expected her. His heart thudding, he marched upstairs. The door of her room was open. Inside he could see Marie, the French maid, on her knees before a big trunk, the bed strewn with filmy garments and tissue paper. She was folding a sheet carefully round Lyddon's photograph. He watched her place it in the tray, puzzled. She wasn't unpacking, then? She was taking things away. He moved and she looked up with a start. As Torquil entered, she rose to her feet.

"What's this?" He spoke roughly in his intense nervousness. "And where's your mistress?" It seemed to him that the maid eyed him with amusement, but she answered him respectfully.

Madame had sent her to fetch some clothes. As Monsieur was probably aware, they were spending the night with Milady and off to Paris in the morning. It would be warm in Paris and Madame desired lighter *lingerie,* besides other little trifles—*des petits riens,* Marie called them. She had

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to-night and on to supper afterwards. At the *Cecil*, Marie believed. So Madame had been persuaded to leave everything in her hands. But there was a message for Monsieur: Madam would write to him from Paris.

Torquil frowned, digesting the news.

"What hotel are you going to? The *Ritz?*"

This was the usual place where the Puffin sought for 'simple comfort.'

"No, Monsieur. Madame has rooms reserved for us at the *Meurice.*"

Again he caught a gleam of mischief that passed across the black eyes demurely raised to his own, as though a frivolous breeze had flicked the surface of a shadowed pool. He asked still more aggressively:

"How long are you staying there?"

Marie resented his attitude.

"But, *Monsieur,* how can I tell?" She threw out her hands with a shrug of the shoulders. "Madame's plans are always of the most uncertain." She picked up some garment from the bed, shook it out and proceeded to fold it.

Torquil disregarded the hint.

"Are the Lettses staying at the *Meurice?*"

"No, Monsieur, at the *Ritz.* Monsieur permits that I go on packing? I have to be back to dress Madame."

Baffled, he retired to his room. What should he do now? It was no use going to Berkeley Square. Fiammetta would be well guarded. Torquil had no desire to run up against the Puffin, another victim of his book. He must wait. It was more dignified. Wait for that letter from Paris. And answer it. Perhaps it was better so? He could always write with more assurance than he could speak. He wouldn't be face to face with his wife. He was conscious of a tired relief, beneath which resentment burned.

So Nan had known and had smiled in her sleeve. That supper at the *Cecil* proved it. He could picture her recounting their meeting to the party gathered round her to-night, giving an imitation of Torquil under Trevelyan's

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laughing eyes. He remembered Nan's mimicry at that Workman's Cafe at Tarascon. How he wished he had never met her! Link by link, he connected the present with that early crisis in his life when he had left Josephine after hearing the mad shepherd pipe. The wrath of Pan? He began to dream. . . .

Later, he crept downstairs and into the drawing-room. No sound came through the folding doors. Marie had finished her task and gone. There was something strange about the place. Was it the absence of plants and flowers? No—the room had been pilfered. A gap on the mantelpiece caught his attention. A bronze statuette was missing. A woman on tiptoe, nude, a lyre lying at her feet, hands joined and upraised to form a cup. He remembered those parted lips, the tilt backward of the head and the exquisite tapering arms. He was conscious of a sense of loss, and of a rising suspicion. On the wall beyond was a square patch of paint brighter than the rest. A picture had been removed. He stared at the empty nail. Here had hung a crayon sketch of his wife, the work of a famous artist who had caught Fiammetta in a mood, rare to her, of melancholy, the long lids of her eyes drooping, drooping, too, the curve of the lips, heavy shadows in her hair. He had christened it "Egypt," emphasizing the Eastern tilt of the eyebrows and that still and brooding beauty of hers. Egypt? Cleopatra. Torquil felt a dull pain, unexpected and bewildering, at the revived memory. Yes, the god with the cloven hoof had punished him for his vain boast. In every man lurked passion. He saw, for a moment, vividly, Pan hiding in the reeds, pipe pressed to his shaggy lips. . . .

With a start, he came back to the present. Why had she wanted this cherished sketch, the bronze Sappho invoking love, the strip of Stuart embroidery, with its stiff lords, hawk on wrist that had lain across the dowry chest? What use could she have for these treasures in Paris?

The crystal and jade carvings were gone, the little Buddha in his shrine, and the snuff-box in Battersea enamel—all the tiny, familiar objects she was wont to caress with her fingers

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faintly tinged with rose.

He flung himself down on the sofa, a sud invading his limbs. Was she leaving him- accord? Why had he not foreseen this, the i clusion? Leaving him—how the world woul could hear old General Merton's verdict: ". too. Serve him right! Can't imagine what s fellow!"

Yes, the world would take her part.

What a fool he had been—a blind fool—t would return to him after that bitter scene cipitate departure! She had robbed him of t of vindicating his manhood. He ought to house next morning, preserving his dignity least, fled from it when he came back from his cruel disillusion. But, for weeks, he had her pensioner. . . .

It was too late now. He slipped lower, his the soft cushion. In the silence of the house the clock on the landing with its deep tick, me The little house—a great author? He closed ing the prick of slowly rising tears in th tightness in his throat. From the silk beneath this favourite corner of Fiammetta's, a ghos to his nostrils—the haunting, musky scent of had not the strength to resist it with its host memories. Yet his reason told him he did it was only the link of the flesh. All the lo given to the woman who first had touched his a mess he had made of his life! The sweeter renounced for the sake of ambition. Then, up by passion. . . .

Where had she gone? With whom?

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CHAPTER XXVI

HE knew at last. With fingers that shook, he smoothed out the sheets before him and read the letter through again. It was headed:

Château de Lusignan
Près Chambord
Loir et Cher
France

"Loir should have an 'e,'" thought Torquil, in error, but obeying the subconscious habit of correction, even in this pregnant moment.

Fiammetta wrote in a steady hand:

"I am living here with Pierrot—shall live with him to the end of my life. It may come as a shock to you, but I think it will also be a relief. You can't mix fire and water, Torquil. You were never *really* happy with me. You will do better work alone. As you read this letter, think of that.

"It is not an excuse for my conduct. There is no excuse, morally. From first to last, I have deceived you. Pierre de Lusignan was my lover for two years before we met—the one passion of my life. I should have gone to him long ago had it not been for Jinks. I couldn't destroy his faith in me. He never guessed, thank God! This being the case, you will wonder why I decided to marry you. I found myself in desperate trouble. We had trusted too long to our immunity from the laws of Nature. She took full toll! I shouldn't have cared except for Jinks. The world was my playground—nothing more. I could easily have lived outside it. But it would have broken my brother's heart. There was only one chance to avoid disaster. Remember, I was honest, Torquil. I told you that I didn't love you,

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could take place at once. I believed in your brains and capacity for clever work. I hoped we should have this in common—a genuine love of beauty in art. I saw in you a great writer, hampered by poverty and want of social influence. There I knew I could help you—make you, in fact, a fitting return by satisfying your ambitions. I married you. A fortnight later came the news of my brother's death and my sacrifice was useless. I had thrown myself away for Jinks and Jinks was gone. It nearly killed me.

"My illness was really a miscarriage, carefully concealed from you, my old doctor in the secret. He himself had counselled marriage. When I recovered, I honestly tried to do my duty, conscious of the debt I owed you. But I became disillusioned. You were never a true artist; your ambition was centred in yourself, your work a means to an end. Moreover, I knew your history. It wasn't the fact of your lowly birth—I don't think I've ever been a snob—but because you were *ashamed* of your parents. You—preaching democracy and covertly sneering at my class! I made inquiries at Ovingdale, after I found that photograph, remembering my brother's story. But I never intended you should know it. I had no wish to hurt your feelings until you hurt those of my friends in the book that has made you popular. Not *famous*—there's a difference.

"On the night that the secret came out, I learnt that Pierrot's wife was dead. I knew then what I should do. You can divorce me or not, as you like. Pierrot wishes to marry me, but for myself it is immaterial. He has always been my husband in the true sense—that of the spirit—though you were master of the flesh. And you only. From the day I promised to become your wife, I have been faithful, in speech and act. It was by my wish that Pierrot left London and was transferred to Warsaw. When he returned, he was my friend—nothing more. This I swear. Once, on our visit to Monte Carlo, I deceived you in a

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tion. Otherwise, my conscience is clear. Yes, according to my lights, I've played fair—and I've suffered. It was *torture* sometimes. You've had your revenge in full, Torquil.

"I suppose this is not at all the letter an erring wife should write to her husband, but I don't feel I've been your wife. Passion alone is not binding. The only chance for us was an intellectual companionship. When this failed, I was simply your mistress. I dare say I'm a great deal to blame, but I've no regret, now it's over. A dark river; I have crossed it. In my philosophy of life, experience must include pain. It is the sharp point of the compass controlling the perfect circle of pleasure.

"For any suffering I have caused you, I'm sorry, but some day you will thank me. You must get closer to life, Torquil, sink your pride, look below the surface. Caste is nothing—it's *manhood* that counts. This last book is unworthy of you. Honestly, and as a friend, I tell you this: you've a spark of genius, but you're stifling it under your misconception of the value of the world's opinion. Cut free and start again. Yes, it is I, your 'sinful wife,' who tell you to *live* more finely.

"FIAMMETTA LYDDON."

The hated name roused in Torquil the old instinct for revenge. Now he would drag it through the mud! The world should know this damning story about the woman it had worshipped, in shameless detail, no feature missing. Lyddon's sister—a "wanton" from birth! But even as he framed the word with a bitter satisfaction, he saw the pitfall he had planned. Ah, she was clever! She had guessed that Torquil would never disclose the fact that love had held no place in their contract; that he had been her tool and dupe. It was to own to a defeat greater than any victory.

Yet divorce her he would. He must be free. He was

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downstairs, a taxi waiting at the door. He told the chauffeur: "Victoria Station," and got in, without explanations. The servants would know soon enough why he had left the house. At the bottom of Park Lane, he leaned out and altered their course. The taxi, piled with his luggage, throbbed along towards Chelsea.

Miss Withers received his explanations in a flutter of excitement. Workmen again? His wife abroad? She was flattered, but full of domestic worries. No meals except breakfast? She drew a deep breath of relief. The last box was bumped down and the taxi-driver went off grumbling. He expected better of Park Lane—but Torquil paid with his own money!

"I'll unpack later," he told Miss Withers, "if you'll have my luggage taken up. I've got to go down into the country immediately after lunch."

"I'll see to it, Mr. Torquil. Perhaps a runner?" She bit her lip.

He left her facing the pile in the hall, with the vague assurance: "If it's needed."

When the door had closed, scrupulous, she carried the lighter luggage herself. There were many things a lady must do against the grain in these days, when servants were so "difficult."

"I'm glad my poor father can't see me!" Miss Withers panted, grasping a suit-case. "But I simply daren't ask *Ireen*. She'd give me notice on the spot!"

Torquil lunched at the station frugally, took his ticket and sauntered on to the platform for Westwick. A train came in on the opposite side and out sprang a young sailor, gripping his bundle, his blue eyes searching the crowd with that far-off, prophetic look which comes to those who live on the waters. A woman brushed past Torquil in the "best clothes" of the poor that ignore the changing laws of fashion yet hold a pathetic dignity.

"Hullo, mother!" the sailor hailed her.

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write again? It would be an excuse, too, for his visit: a "day in the country and a tramp." Later, he would confide his trouble, ask Josephine to decide whether he should divorce his wife. If she said "yes," he would know she wanted him freed, to marry again.

The dust rolled down the long hill that had its birth in the town, an ugly road with straggling villas which at last gave place to a farm. He was glad when he left behind him the endless line of telegraph poles and entered the curving lane that ran up and down on a wave of the Chilterns until it reached the highest crest. He could see now, far off, under an archway of delicate green, Sister Ann, patiently waiting.

As he drew near he experienced a shock. A black board was suspended under the closed window; a notice that the house was for sale, blatant, in white lettering. He hurried on, beneath the wall. For sale? It seemed a profanation. At last he reached the short drive. A wire-haired terrier rose stiffly from the mat outside the porch and barred his approach, with a hollow bark that proclaimed both age and irritation. He looked so aggressive that Torquil paused. Then he heard Josephine's voice:

"Rough? Good boy! What's the matter?"

A note of lavender caught the eye and she appeared in the doorway in a loose overall of that colour, the breeze stirring her soft hair.

"Why, it's *Torquil!*" She stood there, amazed; recovered herself and held out her hand. "Come in! We're in a dreadful muddle—packing up! I've sold the house." She stooped as she spoke to soothe the dog. "It's all right, Rough. It's a friend."

The word moved Torquil strangely. All his prepared speeches vanished.

"A friend in trouble." His voice was husky. "I've come to beg for your advice."

The smile vanished from Josephine's face. To *beg?* Torquil! It must be serious.

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A short silence fell between them. He could hear the hard beat of his heart. Josephine broke the spell; she seemed to be speaking her thoughts aloud:

"So it hasn't brought you happiness?"

"What?" He looked at her curiously.

"Your success."

"I haven't succeeded," said Torquil.

He got up and walked to the window, teeth set, his face hopeless. Over his shoulder he went on:

"I've sold books by the thousand—what's that? The general public's no judge. My last novel is an insult to my intelligence. Needless to say"—his lip curled—"it's the most popular of all! And now, I've lost the creative power. It's gone—I can't write a line. I can't even control my speech. I'm down and out, Josephine."

"No!" She had risen from her chair. She stood beside him. He felt a hand slip through his arm and he stiffened. He was afraid of breaking down. "If you were contented, I might believe it. I've lived among authors, and I know. When you feel that your work is poor, it's because you have the material in you and the power to do work that counts. That's the right ambition, Torquil. Not success, but the hourly struggle to express the best that in you lies. It's what I've always hoped for you."

"But it won't come." His voice choked. He felt her fingers slip down until they found and captured his own.

"It will." She spoke to him like a mother, soothing a child that has had a fall. "You're finding yourself and it's *hard*. Didn't I tell you once, Torquil, that behind the work must be the man—that you needed humanizing? I think suffering has done it. I shall watch for a great book from you."

He wheeled round, his face white.

"You believe in me—still?"

"I do." The stars in her eyes shone. "It needed trouble to clear your vision. But you have the gift—God gave you the gift. Be grateful, and the rest will follow."

"Will it?" He caught her slackening hand between his

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He tried to pull himself together. Tongue-tied, he watched Josephine return, her cheeks faintly flushed.

"I hadn't heard," he said lamely.

"It was a very quiet affair. We're quiet people." She smiled at Torquil. "David writes and I garden—that's the measures of our lives."

"And you're happy?" He brought it out with an effort.

She nodded her head, avoiding response. She felt guilty, sensitive to the contrast between her own state and that of the man before her, deceived and deserted by his wife. In her simplicity, she did not guess that she was involved more closely in his present trouble, nor all he had hoped from her welcome and her old friendliness.

In despair, he drew out his watch.

"I must go. I have to catch a train."

"Now? But you've only just come!" She looked puzzled and distressed. "Can't you wait for a cup of tea? It's only a picnic meal—like our picnics at Les Lecques, but not half so picturesque!" She saw him wince and was conscious herself of an increasing nervousness. "Anyhow, you must see the garden." She opened wide the French windows.

"Yes," said Torquil, "I'd like that. To say good-bye to Sister Ann." He stepped out on to the path.

"That's the worst wrench," said Josephine. "When I see strange faces at the window, I shall feel like one of Bluebeard's wives! Still, I can come here on moonlight nights when nobody is about and talk to her from the lane."

"She'll miss you." A lump rose in his throat. Never would he write there, with the scent of lavender around him.

They walked in silence across the lawn, through the latched door, to the kitchen garden. The apple blossom was nearly over, the long border full of spikes of juicy green and the promise of flowers. But Torquil had no eyes for these. Once more a gust of wind met them and he saw Josephine resist it, head bent forward, lavender skirts swept

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for the air had grown chilly with the approach of evening. "You're catching cold! Do go in. There's Sister Ann frowning at me! I won't say good-bye. I—*can't.*" He stepped back and closed the door almost roughly in her face.

Half-way up the lane, he turned. She was there, leaning out, a pale ghost against the shadows that wait on the sunset hour. Torquil stood for a moment bare-headed, like a man on entering a church, with the same instinct of reverence. Then he wheeled round and plodded forward. There was nothing further to hope or pray for.

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CHAPTER XXVII

NIGHT had fallen. Torquil sat at the rickety table in the window of his bare Chelsea room. In the deep blue of the sky stars were appearing, one by one. A white-capped nurse stole out on to the hospital balcony for a breath of purer air. With a sudden shattering of the silence, a fire-engine emerged from the neighbouring station—like a dragon with glittering crest from its cave—to wheel round with a clanging of bells into Church Street and Fulham Road. Fainter grew the alarum, and peace settled down again over the dew-spangled lawns.

Torquil, head propped on his hands, was reviving memories, bitter and sweet. Once, a brief smile curved his lips as his thoughts turned to Carrie. Not even this last link with the past had been wanting to complete the day. He dwelt on the incident with a curious absence of resentment for Carrie's singular lack of taste. It seemed already far away, trivial and unimportant, yet, unknown to him, it marked a definite milestone in his life.

Toiling up the steepest hill in the crooked lane, he had heard behind him the sound of approaching wheels and had stepped aside on to the grass to allow the vehicle to pass. But the dog-cart stopped, and a voice hailed him:

"How do you do, Mr. Torquil? You see, I've remembered your name, although you've forgotten me! You came to tea once at our house. I'm Colonel Brackney's niece."

"Of course!" Torquil emerged from his dream. Carrie, at least, was real. Too real, in a covert coat, hopelessly creased, with a limp collar, a felt hat wedged down on her head and supported by the carroty bun in its torn net, wisps escaping. Carrie, draggled but coquettish.

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it indifferently. He was tired both in brain and body. He clambered up to the seat beside her. She flicked the cob and it bounded forward, Carrie bumping against Torquil.

"Sorry! He always starts like that. I suppose you've been to see Mrs. Heron?" She straightened her hat with her whip hand, and the lash shot out and stung his cheek. "Sorry!" said Carrie again.

"It's nothing." Torquil ignored her question. He was not going to talk to her. Above all, of Josephine! It was bad enough to sit beside her in this close proximity. But Carrie was conversational.

"It's a long time since you've been here. I suppose when Mr. Merriman died, Westwick lost its main attraction?" Ever jealous of Josephine, she was hoping he would say yes. As he did not reply immediately, she went on, with a sly glance, "Some changes there—— Hold up, Grampus!" She dragged at the reins as they commenced the steep descent. "Loose stones," she explained to Torquil, "and he's a clumsy old fool! That's why we called him 'Grampus.' Rolls, you know, and won't look where he's going. What was I saying? Oh, yes. About the Herons. They've sold the house, so I hope, *now*, we shall get some really decent neighbours. Young people—to stir things up! It's pretty deadly for me at Westwick, but I've got to look after the old folk. My duty—and I do it."

Torquil nodded. There followed a pause. He must say something. He searched his brains for a suitable topic.

"How are the pigs?"

"I don't keep 'em any longer. I've gone in for breeding dogs," Carrie informed him. "Spaniels. They pay." A light came into her freckled face and she turned to him hungrily. "I suppose you don't want a dog? I've a nice puppy—a little lady—left over from the last batch. Make a good companion. I'd let her go cheap—for *you*." She gave him a glance that startled Torquil. He hastily disclaimed any desire for a lady companion.

Carrie, disappointed, resumed.

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that dog of his—no teeth and full of complaints
care to have him about. But he wouldn't—was
Not even to train as a substitute. Said Ro
'jealous'! And Mrs. Heron backed him u
isn't it?"

Torquil frowned.

"I think she was right. Old friends shoul
Carrie gave an annoyed sniff.

"Oh, of course, you're one of her admire
she's got so very many—had to fall back on
But that's a pretty ancient story. It wasn't
Westwick. I wonder they didn't go off befo

Torquil felt his gorge rise.

"Why shouldn't she marry him? He's a
and a gentleman. You talk as if Mrs. Heron
with a groom."

It was said in all innocence, but the effect
Carrie jerked the reins so sharply that the
hoofs grating on the hard and stony road. Th
out and cut his shoulders. The bewildered a
forward down the hill and the cart rocked a
its worn springs. Carrie gave Torquil a ver
and seized the first weapon to hand.

"Talking of grooms"—her voice was a
me that a friend of mine, Mrs. Delaporte,
said he *knew* you—had lived in the same tow
was Oliphant and he came from a place calle

"Really?" Torquil looked indifferent—fel
didn't care. He seemed to have passed some
to look back on life from the other side, a
curious spectator. "Oliphant? I remember

Carrie took this for a pose, though she was
acquiescence. She felt balked of her revenge
to follow up the attack.

"Oh, you do? Small world, isn't it? It
score for me though, telling Mrs. Merriman

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—— What's the word? Your publisher's wife! I *was* surprised. A great score!"

"It must have been," said Torquil coolly. He was trying to analyse his sensations. It hadn't affected Josephine's conduct. Had Merriman known? Even here, he felt no concern. It belonged to that other side of life, a picture already blurred.

Carrie watched him, discontented. Nothing annoys the mischievous so much as a shaft that fails to sting. She had no more arrows in her quiver. Sulkily, she drove on in silence. As they neared the town, the cob slowed down. He had little confidence in his driver, and still less respect for her. She allowed him to snatch at a hedge, staining his bit with a leafy lather, whilst she flirted with some young farmer leaning over a gate on the lane. The Colonel would never permit this, nor allow Grampus to break his paces. Yet he loved the Colonel and welcomed that sure and masterful touch on the reins. The last time he had come to town in Carrie's charge he had narrowly missed collision with a load of timber on a cart that persistently barred their progress. He dropped into a rolling amble.

Carrie whipped him—to no avail. She was already regretting the impulse that had wrecked a chance of flirtation with this good-looking young author. Men were so rare in Westwick! She tried to atone for her mistake.

"I hear your new book's splendid. I haven't read it myself yet, but the Rector's promised to lend it to me. You must make a *lot* of money!" It was Carrie's highest measure of praise.

"Yes, it pays," said Torquil obliquely.

They drew up at the station.

"If you see Uncle Tom on the platform," Carrie became fussy, "will you tell him that I'm *waiting?* He comes in by the train you go by—the 5.10. There's plenty of time." She was hoping to detain Torquil for a last gossip by the dog-cart, but, already on the pavement, he held out his hand to her.

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for your lift, Miss Brackney. Good-bye."

There was nothing to be done. Mortified, she watched him go. What nice, straight legs he had! If only she'd been more prudent, she might have arranged to meet him again on one of her rare visits to town. And she didn't even know his address.

Torquil drew a breath of relief when he found himself alone on the platform. Carrie reminded him of a limpet, that prefers the foul harbour water and clings to the nearest keel. In due course the train puffed in, dislodging some dingy-looking folk and, at a distance, Colonel Brackney, erect and thin as a peeled wand.

Torquil reintroduced himself and delivered Carrie's message. The Colonel, courteous as ever, insisted on finding him a carriage and stood at the open door with the air of a host speeding a guest. It wouldn't hurt the cob to wait.

"I very nearly missed this train," he told Torquil cheerfully. "I'd been lunching with an old friend who has settled outside Ribington, and, as we drove in, we saw a fire and turned down to look at it. A big blaze—some printing works—and the engines had arrived late. The roof had already fallen in. I'm afraid it will be completely gutted. Luckily, no lives lost and the place was insured—so the constable told us."

"Ribington?" Torquil was thinking. "Not Abbott and Leatherweight's?"

"I believe that was the name," said the Colonel. "I hope you've no interests in it?"

"Indirectly. My book's being printed there—the second impression," replied the author.

"Dear me!" The old man looked grave. "I'm sorry. Will it mean a loss?"

"No, merely a delay. It's of no consequence." Torquil held out his hand, for the porter was slamming the doors as he passed. "We're off! Good-bye, sir." He watched the Colonel step back, give a last wave, and march off, defiant of age, the station-master touching his cap.

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into the darkness faintly warmed by the starlight? It's of no consequence."

Yet a week ago it would have caused him both worry and irritation. There would be a serious break in the sales of *Quenched Fires* whilst his publisher sought to replace the burnt edition. There were "fires" which could not be "quenched"! The capricious fancy caught him. And others that burned themselves out. Like his passion for Fiammetta. Why was he so indifferent? What had happened to change his whole outlook? He could find no answer to the riddle.

A fresh picture rose up before him; another ghost from the past.

He had walked part of the way home avoiding the crowded buses. Outside the Brompton Oratory he had encountered Lady Mary returning from some evening service. He saw her first, a few yards off. Would she cut him? He didn't care. To his surprise she bowed as usual with that absent, shining air of hers, wrapped in a secret contemplation of mysteries unshared by the world. She had even smiled faintly at Torquil.

"She won't *condescend* to a quarrel," he thought. But he felt no remorse or annoyance, no pricking of his sensitive pride. It didn't count. Nothing counted.

Torquil shifted his position, aware of cramp in his long legs. Through the silence he could hear a whispering below his window near to the area gate; *"Ireen"* saying good-night to her lover. Then the back door slammed and a hush succeeded. Unconsciously, he gave a sigh of relief. He was aware of a change in himself, but he could not yet disentangle the cause. It was not Fiammetta—she seemed to belong to an unreal and distant past. Josephine? No, that was over. The perfect romance—he had never possessed her. Unattainable, she was more dear. She had been his, undefiled, in *The Shepherd on the Heights*. It was better so. Nothing mattered.

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He stared out across the Square and the low
to the widening bowl of the heavens where fre
shining roads. Leading—where? What migl
trolled the worlds upon worlds beyond—the
eternal space? What lay at the back of
Josephine would say it was God. God, to wh
spire pointed—a spire of phallic origin! Ben
devout prayed to be "delivered from tempt
God must smile—if there were a God. . . .

Gradually, the voice of London sank to res
grew still. Lights were out in upper window
the great town, the reflection of her myriad
the rising mist with a lurid, amber glow. I
of Flame, Torquil thought, of the Israelites
By day, too, a Pillar of Smoke—London, the
ness where man, outcast, sought in vain for
the Promised Land.

Suddenly the dreamer started. From far
piercing note of a motor horn; some belated
perhaps, a doctor to the bedside of a dying
Toot! Then again, silence.

But the sound had unlocked the magic gat
had crossed the frontier. Torquil was bac
hot-foot, in pursuit of the cue. It seemed t
vast importance, like a clear call out of the s

The cornet player in Pimlico? That ni
touched by fancy, he had seen Fiammetta pas
bridge to the lagoon, bathed in moonlight, l
torch, sparks glinting from her feet, he h
piping in Shepherd's Market. Shepherd's?
on the Heights—pan-pipes? No, it wasn't
missing something—aware of a gap. And in
himself in the library at Westwick, a slim v
in his hand. Stevenson—posthumous poem
the daisied lawn with, beyond it, the hills, vei
and the vision of himself crowned with
stepping, tall——" Ah, he had it now! H

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"Until, in singing garments
Comes royally, at call—
Comes limber-hipped Indiff'rence
Free-stepping, straight and tall—
Comes, singing and lamenting,
The sweetest pipe of all."

"Limber-hipped Indiff'rence?" When a man had crossed the frontier line of "Love" and "Hope," desire and fear—when "nothing mattered"? Not an end, but a starting-point, free of the world, beyond both sneers and caresses, beyond pride, beyond money. ". . . singing and lamenting, the sweetest pipe of all."

Liberty—but at a price! He could write a book on that. A book that would be worth writing. True—every word of it. Call it *The Escape*—no! *The Deliverance*. His cheeks warmed, a sudden thrill ran through him. Like a struggling architect who sees in a dream the house he will live in, his work finally accomplished, the "House Beautiful" planned by himself, Torquil began to build. First, the foundations, from which the walls rose nobly, enclosing the sitting-rooms; the hall with its sense of light and space, the shining sweep of the stairs; up, up, past nurseries and quiet bedrooms that breathed of sleep, to the roof that should crown the exquisite fancy, perfect as the roof of heaven.

Words came hurtling through his mind, joined together, formed phrases. Every pulse in his body throbbed. It seemed to him that a new flood of life poured into his torpid limbs; that his brain was lit up by a torch, vision one with expression. A single line emerged from the chaos, persisted and would not be denied—the opening words. Blindly he groped for his fountain pen and drew the pad of paper to him. Unconscious of the action, he tapped the point on his thumb-nail. Then, his pen took possession.

At times it stopped and Torquil frowned. On it would go again. He tore off the sheets as he covered them and dropped them on the shabby carpet. Once he swore, crossed out a line with a thick stroke—it rang false—and, setting his jaw, wrote another. He had slipped back to his old

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There was no need for alteration.

"It's good," he said between his teeth, "I don't care if it's never published!"

The words brought him up sharp. A failure? He had to live. But Arkwright—oh, curse Arkwright! With clear eyes he saw him now as an evil influence—a parasite that preyed on authors. He hit the table with his hand.

"I don't care if I starve! I shall write this book because—because——" Words failed him. Suddenly, he threw back his head and laughed. "Because I've got to—a damned good reason."

He settled down to his work.

Slowly the blue died out of the sky, carrying the stars with it. Now it looked like a leaden bowl, inverted, over the sleeping city. Mysteriously the bowl cracked on the edge of the horizon and a streak of light came through, primrose-coloured, to spread and spread until the whole sky was aglow and up rose the great, gold sun.

Lamps paled in the streets. Stray cats crept home furtively and, through the silence, came the rumble of market cars. A new day—with its hopes and fears, its vain endeavour, and its achievement. The power of money awoke from slumber, the lust of the flesh, the greed for fame. But Torquil had left all these behind him. For the love of his work, he wrote.

THE END

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